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FOUR CROTCHETS TO A BAR

VOL. I.

FOUR CROTCHETS TO A BAR

A NOVEL

BY THE
AUTHOR OF 'THE GWILLIANS'

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON

SMITH, ELDER, & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE

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FOUR CROTCHETS TO ONE BAR.

CHAPTER I.

DAUGHTERS AND SLAVES.

IN the year 1860 there were only four Miss Crotchets alive. There had been eight, and they had all eight lived together in the 'Garden House' at Shellford-by-Shore, in the county of Suffolk.

In taking possession of the 'Garden House,' many years before, the sisters had prudently secured a good dry vault, with eight distinct compartments, in Shellford old churchyard. To the four lower divisions of this desirable vault had Sissey, Polly, Nanny, and Winny already removed by the year 1860.

They had died, it need scarcely be said, in and out : violating, in this particular and in this only, the strict rules of primogeniture by which they were accustomed to be governed. As a result of this unavoidable eccentricity of demise, Miss Lilly Crotchet found herself at seventy years of age the eldest sister remaining :—Lilly, who, when Sissey was alive, would not have been allowed to wind a clock. To Miss Lilly succeeded Miss Fussy. Fussy was sixty-seven, and she was so hard of hearing that she counted for almost nobody. Indeed, the sisters were apt to feel aggrieved if Fussy proved that she had heard anything, by contributing an unexpected observation in the family circle. There was a general feeling that Fussy ought to hear ‘everything or nothing at all,’ so that ‘you might be sure where you were in your dealings with her.’ She was followed by the twins, the girls, poor old maidens of sixty-five ; still called, as their mother called them when *she* fastened, for distinction, a coral and a

cornelian necklet round their infant throats, Rosy and Posy. Nothing which had happened to them in all their lives, had ever prevented the Miss Crotchets from thinking of themselves and of each other, as still rather young; so the old nursery names had never struck them as incongruous. They were even in the habit of advertising them to the world, when announcing in the papers their deaths, as the ‘Children of the late Hobbes Crotchet, Esq., of Bellingham Park, in the county of Norfolk, and of Spanish Town, in the island of Jamaica.’

The blameless blunder of their births had been committed by the eight Miss Crotchets at this same Bellingham Park, which was as fine a piece of property as the heart of a West India merchant could desire to possess. Very proud had Hobbes Crotchet been of his position in the county, and very carefully used he to drop the fact of purchase when talking to any casual stranger, leaving it to be imagined that he had inherited his glories, instead of acquiring them

only, when his luck was up in sugar and slaves.

For to sugar and slaves Hobbes Crotchet owed all that was his. In his unimportant youth he had been bred in his father's counting-house in Spanish Town, Jamaica. An only son, he acquired by his father's death possession of moderate estates in that island; to these he speedily added the far larger property inherited by his wife, one Mademoiselle La Touche, of the neighbouring French colony of St. Domingo. There, for several uneventful years, Hobbes managed his sugar canes and his slaves for himself and became knowing in the business, so that, whatever the state of the mercantile tide, his mark upon man or hogshead was sure to command its fullest price.

As an enterprising and aggressive sort of man, however, is sure to weary sooner or later of a too facile realisation of his projects, so Hobbes wearied before many calm years were over his head. A deficiency of obstacles was

at the root of his discontent ; but he was far from understanding this ; mistakenly attributing his want of ease to the pressure of overwork. Mrs. Hobbes also wearied herself to death in St. Domingo. She had at this period of her life always more money and generally more time than she knew what to do with ; and year by year she became more fully convinced that in England only could she ever hope to realise the El Dorado of her feeble dreams.

Putting this and that together,—‘ this ’ being Mrs. Crotchet’s whimsies, and ‘ that ’ Mr. Crotchet’s overwork,—the pair determined to quit the island, to hand over the management of the estate to a Spanish attorney, and to outbid Bruce Dobbes, Esq., late of the East India Company’s service, for the purchase of Bellingham Park.

Now followed for the Hobbes Crotchets a period of delicious excitement. New friends, a magnificent house, the worship of all the county ; whilst the hopes of a son and heir

served to increase their satisfaction. But alas! Mrs. Crotchet had made a mistake. It was only Miss Sissey followed by her seven sisters.

Together with this rapid increase of family at home, occurred an equally rapid deficiency of funds from abroad. Two concurrent evils, which Mr. Hobbes Crotchet had from previous experience equally little reason to expect, and under the passive endurance of which his temper lamentably suffered.

Under the management of the admirable Spaniard the slaves seemed to be fattening upon the sugar, and consuming the rum faster than it was barrelled. Watching with ever-growing anxiety the ship of his fortunes in those western seas, Mr. Crotchet found more and more cause for alarm, for '91 was coming.

‘Liberty, Fraternity, and Equality’ were born. The very rats were stirring in their holes on the ‘La Touche’ estates. The Spaniard sent home for ‘advices.’ What advices had Hobbes to give him?

Since the 'Friends of the Blacks' had willed it, his fortunes must go to the dogs; but Hobbes himself need not go after them. So he stayed where he was and despaired. If it is proved to a man, by the incontestable proof of the strongest, that he can save nothing of his but his skin, he had better wear that whole coat and be thankful, and this was Hobbes' case as regarded his property in St. Domingo. Beneath that unbroken surface, however, what passions raged in Hobbes' bosom as the fatal months passed on, bringing fire to his lands and death to his Spaniard; whilst over all that had once been his the dusky rabble ran riot.

Their wrongs! Hobbes had his wrongs, and he could see no other. What detestation seized him, what indignation, what furious prayings for revenge against revolutionary Frenchmen, radical mulattos, and ever to be cursed dogs! Blacks! Slaves!

They danced a murderous jig before him in

his very dreams, in and out among the sugar canes, with Lilly's naked little body stuck upon a pike. Yelling Frenchmen in red night-caps; blacks with throats as dark as blood, and teeth that seemed to gleam for whiter flesh; and grinning gibbering half-castes with goblins in their arms.

Still he held his father's impoverished estate in Jamaica, and in '94 he went over in a British man-of-war to that island. His share in the expedition against St. Domingo was strictly pacific. He sold his now problematic interests in the once splendid La Touche estates for a sum anything but problematic, to one of those hopeful speculators who arise to fatten upon the starvation of others. With this little bit of money in the bottom of his purse, and with his affairs in Jamaica, as he trusted, well guarded by an agent more lucky than the first, he once more left the West Indies behind him, and returned to the capacious embrace of Mrs. Hobbes Crotchet and to the eight little kisses of the

eight Miss Crotchets. The twins had been born during his absence.

To Hobbes it appeared almost a liberty which his daughters had taken, to present him with so much more of themselves than it had occurred to his pre-occupied mind to expect or desire. They were for the most part bony girls, their legs surrounded by white frills, their arms protruding from neat 'pinbefores.' Their light hair cropped straight round their smooth heads, framed faces with marked features, but eyes of no particular colour.

Thus Mr. Crotchet returned for the last time to Bellingham Park; to pack up his goods and his daughters, and to own to all the curious county that he was but a poor burnt-out West India merchant.

With the proceeds of the sale of Bellingham Park he purchased a moderately remunerative property in the neighbouring county, consisting of 'The Squire's House,' 'The Garden House,' and five others commonly called 'The Terrace,'

at Shellford-by-Shore. There he removed his family.

The ‘Squire’s House,’ which he selected for his own occupation, stood well back from the sea, amongst its own trees and shrubberies, a quarter of a mile inland; but the ‘Garden House’ and the ‘Terrace’ stood placidly staring at the ocean from every one of their front windows. These were commonly let as lodging-houses, in the season, to the families of Norfolk and Suffolk squires who came down there to be bored for the sake of their healths.

Before these houses ran a private road, bordered by a strip of dusty garden, and beyond that again the public road continued to the edge of the cliff. Over this bit of inner road and this dusty garden Hobbes, as the owner of the property, exercised a right-of-way. Now a right-of-way is a comfortable thing to have, producing in the mind of a dejected man a feeling of renewed consequence; feebly analogous to that altogether unattainable sense of

importance enjoyed by a small terrier in his master's garden. A ponderous iron bar, cutting off all approach to the Terrace by the inner road, advertised yearly the owner's rights.

In 1795, then, the Crotchets took possession of the 'Squire's House,' and there the Miss Crotchets began to grow up. They were but little affected by the downfall of all their fine expectations. They were as well served by one maid as formerly they had been by three. Their stray shillings were as sufficient as ever for the purchase of lengths of Penelope canvas to cover with parrots and roses. Four large bedsteads in two smallish rooms held their spare persons as conveniently as double the number had done at the Park; and, upon the whole, life was much the same thing for the Miss Crotchets after the slaves had mutinied and had been emancipated, as before. Indeed they had but one pattern and, so far as could be observed in those days, but one character between them; and their father was

much tempted to believe that a sample of their kind would have been sufficient.

Even Mrs. Hobbes had perhaps arrived at the same conclusion, for the next thing she did was to give them a brother, and the next, poor soul, was to die. This was in 1800.

Now do not suppose that Miss Sissey stepped to the front; lengthened her frocks and her hair; handed down her 'pinbefores;' and assumed a maternal attitude towards little Bolton and her seven sisters. Not at all. Such ideas never entered Miss Sissey's quiescent brain. On the contrary, she continued to do everything as she had done it before; all her sisters did it with her, and the family grew up somehow.

Hobbes had his friends; ate their dinners and gave his own; and having no one now to share his authority or to divide his pleasures, spent most of his thoughts and his money upon himself.

Time brought indeed an increase of quantity

for his daughters; but no journeys, no lovers, no friends, no company. Another set of girls with their opportunities might have worked out for themselves a perfect tragedy of withered hopes and blighted lives: not so they. They were not by nature excitable. Of novels to hasten the development of feeling there were none in those days for them; and those sweet pretty lines in 'The Young Ladies' Album,' addressed 'To My Home' or 'My Sister,' left Hobbes' girls as they found them. Nothing, in fact, ever happened to them, because it never occurred to them to think it anything when it did happen: the outcome of life being chiefly what people themselves have put into it.

The day arrived at length, however, when the Miss Crotchets were startled into the discovery that although 'all things happen,' as they assured each other, 'in the course of nature;' yet that the course of nature can seriously interfere with the course of the human will. Hobbes was dying. The gout was

killing him. He clearly would not see out the year '20.

He had survived long enough to deplore, as he himself put it, 'the birth of Sentiment in England,' as well as of Fraternity in France; to see his country, as he bitterly stated it, 'govern by her nerves instead of by her fists and sinews.' In body and in temper he had long been afflicted, but, owing to a customary abstinence from flights of fancy, he was able to preserve his mental faculties clear up to the end.

He gave his son Bolton, now a well-grown youth wanting but a few months of his majority, much sound advice before he died. To him he bequeathed in Turnpike Trusts about 300*l.* per annum, together with the paternal estate in Jamaica. He accompanied the bequest with a strong injunction to his son to go there at once, and to manage his affairs for himself as his grandfather had done before him.

In the case of his daughters his testamentary

dispositions were almost unheard of, dictated by a peculiar man under peculiar circumstances.

From Sissey the eldest, who was thirty-five, down to the twins, who were ten years younger, he left them each simply 100*l.* per annum. This sum to be paid quarterly, on the first day of every three months, by the hands of four careful trustees, in whose names the principal was to be duly invested. Permission was given to any particularly fortunate sister to replace the trustees by a husband, but subject always to the trustees' approval of her choice. Should she marry without this approbation, she was to find herself absolutely penniless. The trustees themselves were encumbered by ingenious restrictions upon the re-investment of the capital, which was never to be touched, under any conceivable circumstance, by any Miss Crotchet herself.

Upon the death of any one of the eight sisters—and here the eccentricity of the will chiefly displayed itself—her share was to revert

to her brother Bolton, or to her brother's children, one quarter's payment only being made in advance to bury her suitably, in addition to the quarter then current.

Thus the Miss Crotchets were released by their expiring parent from ever feeling any feminine anxieties as to the disposition of their property. And their treatment as grown-up children was carefully secured for the term of their natural lives.

Having made all these prudent arrangements Hobbes went groaning to that other world, to which he trusted to redress his wrongs in this.

CHAPTER II.

SISTERS.

BOLTON, having duly deposited his father's worn-out body by the side of Mrs. Hobbes' in Bellingham Park church-yard, made it his next care to establish his sisters in the 'Garden House.' The 'Squire's House' was beyond their means. Now the 'Garden House' was simply the last in the lodging-house terrace: in no respects superior to its neighbours, and distinguished only from them in possessing, as the end house, an additional piece of garden ground.

Here, with the remains of their ancient furniture and plate, with a picture of Bellingham Park over the cheffonier, and of Belling-

ham Church over the whatnot ; with Mr. Hobbes Crotchet in brass buttons over the mantelpiece, and Mrs. Hobbes Crotchet in diamonds over the door ; the sisters settled themselves down, to lead a quiet uneventful life upon eight hundred pounds a year, paid quarterly in eight distinct cheques by a succession of trustees, and duly acknowledged by themselves in eight perfectly similar signatures.

Here, in 1860, four of the Miss Crotchets might still be found. They were now growing quite familiarised with that event which had startled them but once in their younger days.

Sissey, Polly, Nanny, and Winny, had already departed from the four-post beds in the 'Garden House' to the good dry vault in the church-yard ; and the consequence to the surviving sisters, was that four hundred pounds of their yearly income had reverted to their brother, Bolton, now a flourishing merchant in Jamaica.

This arrangement was beginning to strike

them as rather hard. Why had their father been so careful of Bolton's interests? He was very well able to look after his own. Four hundred pounds a year is less for four persons to live upon, than eight hundred is for eight; and after four the difference rapidly increases. One hundred more gone, and the house could scarcely be kept up, and the consequences to them would be very embarrassing. As the result of these considerations, their solicitude about each other's healths rapidly increased. The poor old ladies, with their blank slow lives, were beginning, after a number of years of indifference, to scan each other's faces closely with a new anxiety.

Every fresh sign of approaching age and of inevitable decay was noted down now with unaccustomed tremors; and monotony and passivity had aged the Miss Crotchets more than many a troubled existence had aged the wives and mothers around them. It may have been the mere decay of unused faculties; or it

may have been that in missing the depressing influences of common sorrows, they had missed also the exhilarating effects of common joys. Be that as it may, when Rosy looked at Posy she saw a lined and wrinkled countenance, cheekbones more prominent than ever, eyes bleared and blinded with cataract, and surmounting all a thin black front of hair, confined by a velvet band. Fussy's deafness had given her a stoop, and had also shortened her temper; but Lilly was the sisters' chief care. Well aware she was of it too, and she seemed to take a spiteful pleasure in doing imprudent things: in walking up and down the terrace, for instance, on wet evenings, looking out at the sea as she used to do forty years ago when they all did it with her.

Through the gathering darkness her rigid form could be still discerned, as with her scanty black garments clinging to her, she paced to and fro upon the pavement, in front of the houses. The evening was wet, and her pattens

clinked incessantly, to the irritation of the other sisters, sitting within at their tea.

‘There she goes!’ said Rosy. ‘Look at her. She might be the pendulum of the kitchen clock. She, that is the eldest of us all.’

‘Yes,’ answered Posy, in a melancholy tone, ‘but we don’t die as we come. We never do. It’s odd and even. In and out. There’s no accounting for it. I wish there were.’ Then reckoning on her fingers she added:—‘The first and the fourth, the second and the sixth. It ought to be the third of us next, and that would be her; but we don’t die according to age.’

‘What’s that you’re saying?’ cried Fussy, who was pouring out the tea. ‘That I’ve not helped you according to age? That’s your cup and that’s Rosy’s, and there is as little to choose between one and the other as there is between yourselves.’

‘She’s getting deafer than ever,’ said Rosy to her twin sister. Does not hear a quarter

of what you say, and looks so stupid, doesn't she? It's my belief her affliction is getting beyond her ears, and will soon reach the brain. There is a connection, so I've always heard.'

The blind sister, thus addressed, poked her face close to the deaf one's behind the tea urn. Then unwilling, by the admission that all she saw was a blurred outline, to divert the stream of criticism from Miss Fussy's failings to her own, she replied:—'Now I come to look at her, she does not look as if she were quite right somehow. She does not look as she used.'

'Because you're getting as blind as those that will not see, yourself,' was the unsparing answer. 'But never mind,' continued Rosy, unchecked in her freedom of speech by Posy's obvious distress. 'You will not go off any the sooner for being in the dark. You've got ten fingers to feel with, and I'll take care you fumble along. You and me ought to live the longest; but dear! dear! what'll become of

us, supposing, as there's every reason to expect, that Lilly walks herself off her legs this winter, and that she'—pointing behind the urn—'finds her brain fail her?'

'My brain!' cried Fussy, catching the right word at last, and raising both hands to her head in terror. 'What ails you at it? I don't use it. It will last long enough. I've had my hair cut three times as often as the rest of you, all my life, because they said it was good for the head.'

'For the matter of that,' interrupted Posy, 'have not I let mine grow down the nape of my neck for luck these thirty years, whilst Rosy has had her's cut all round since she was a child, and yet I've never had any luck, and my sight is going first.'

'That's because you've left off wearing keepers in your ears. I always told you, when you did, that you'd live to repent it. "Keepers in your ears will always keep your sight:" that was what Dr. Dodds, of Bellingham, used to

say ; and so I've found it,' added Rosy conclusively.

'And Dr. Dodds said,' cried Fussy eagerly, 'that if I could only stand with my ears reversed, I should hear quite as well as the rest. He said himself when he came here to visit Papa : "It's not the organs of hearing themselves, it is the position, sir." Quite as well as the rest I should hear, if only my head was the other way up.'

The poor soul peered anxiously at her sisters to see what effect this announcement had upon them ; but they had heard it too often before to be favourably influenced by it.

'If there was only you and me left, Posy, on two hundred pounds a year, we should have to go into lodgings,' said Rosy ; 'we that were born in the lap of luxury.'

'You've got no chance to die there then,' said Miss Lilly, wet and stern, at the dining-room door.

'And the first floor back, too,' continued

Rosy, ‘because they let the fronts for the season.’ As she spoke she wiped a feeble tear from the crape frill, which replaced the coral necklace of her youth.

Meanwhile, Miss Lilly shook out her wet skirts and remarked in a decided tone, ‘It is aggravating for a person to die and leave five and tenpence when, if they had only held out two days longer, it might have been five-and-twenty pounds.’

As she spoke she pushed from the fire a certain chair that had been Winny’s, and replaced it by her own. Now Winny was only just dead. She was the unfortunate sister for whom the crape frills were then worn ; and she had been guilty of so great a want of consideration for her survivors, as to die just two days before the end of the quarter, in spite of all that could be done to induce her to live.

Now, if one of the Miss Crotchets died at the beginning of a quarter, she was in a position to leave behind her five-and-twenty pounds in

her purse, in addition to the five-and-twenty to be paid for the quarter next ensuing by the trustees, according to Hobbes' will. A death ill-chosen as to time, therefore, inflicted a serious loss upon the surviving sisters.

The quarterly payments being due on the first of April, it was on March 29, in this year 1860, that Winny had lain on the big bed in the spare room, in body sick unto death, in mind far away in a land of shadows. Outside the rain was pouring in torrents, and the sea tumbling in with rolling billows; inside the fire burnt low in the grate, and the light faded upon the walls of the dull room. Miss Lilly and Miss Rosy sat by the hearth.

Miss Lilly murmured, 'The doctor thinks he can keep her till the first—till the first, I say.'

Then Winny had opened her eyes suddenly, and with momentary energy had wailed—

'Oh! Lilly! I can't help it! I can't help it! Forgive me! You need not buy new black.

And so she had died.

Winny had always been tender-hearted, and she had taken all her medicines and had tried so hard to keep herself alive because of that five and tenpence.

So the sisters did up their old black gowns for Winny, and they tried, but often failed, to reflect upon the circumstances without a feeling of bitterness towards herself.

Not daring to carry the blame any further, they woefully assigned it to the doctor; only Miss Fussy had the hardihood to mutter that—‘It was very hard of Providence, and she didn’t care if It heard it.’

The others felt whilst they listened that the neuter pronoun alone was scarcely sufficient to cover the rashness of the remark. ‘It’ might do it again, and at one day off the beginning of a quarter next time, or even one hour.

CHAPTER III.

OVER THE SEA.

BOLTON CROTCHET had hitherto kept himself and his family well out of the reach of his sisters' criticism. Going out to Jamaica after his father's death, in the midst of a terrible depression in the sugar trade, he had been wise enough to turn his attention to coffee. He took up and cultivated a hitherto neglected coffee plantation in the immediate neighbourhood of his own cane-fields. A singular hopefulness of disposition enabled him to borrow capital at a rate of interest which frightened the most sanguine competitors out of the field. And by a system of minute personal attention, aided largely by the partiality of Fortune, he presently

found himself not only in a position to clear off his original liabilities, but also to double, and even treble, his astonishing outlay. Thus he became in the course of some years one of the most prosperous growers of the island.

At forty years of age, and not before, he found time to marry. His choice fell upon an elegant creole, with dark, languid eyes, a complexion of pure creamy whiteness, and an entire devotion to being well loved and well dressed, which would have done credit to the typical French woman.

No woman of any Northern nation might, however, have vied with her in her earnest desire to be permitted to enjoy life, without any of the trouble of living. To her, her son and daughter were simply pets and playthings. To have parted her from them, for the sake of their education, would have been impossible. So long as her boy was silent and did not question her, and her girl was pretty and could dance and chatter, what cared she for education.

After her early death, however, these things were remedied. The children were not, indeed, sent to England; but the best education that the island afforded was bestowed upon John, and an English governess brought up Augusta better than her own mother would have done.

Augusta was her father's favourite, and in her lively society he allowed himself to be easily consoled for the loss of those superabundant sisters whom he had not seen for over thirty years.

In spite of his wealth he was gratified by the neat little sum which each of them released for him at her death. In his unfettered hand the modest hundred per annum soon ceased inadequately to represent the original capital. No restrictions bound him, as they did the much-enduring trustees.

His communications with England were chiefly confined to the despatch of successive business-like letters of condolence, upon the

death of one sister after another, each duly addressed to the eldest survivor.

One idea seemed to underlie all these monotonous notes. It was that one so little needed here could not fail to be of more worth elsewhere, must now have a chance of finding a market where her value might be less depreciated. It was a business man's notion that every commodity must sooner or later be turned to account, his prejudice naturally being that, circulation once set free, a demand must be found somewhere which should be fully equal to the supply.

Entertaining these views, Bolton could not but be hopeful upon his sisters' account, as well as consoled upon his own. As a further source of comfort, he invariably concluded his letters by informing the bereaved sisters of the despatch of 'several parcels of excellent coffee,' which he trusted would 'duly come to hand, as per advice inclosed.'

Accordingly, upon the death of each sister,

packets of West India coffee as regularly went the round of the parish of Shellford as did the black gloves and scarves at their funerals. The vicar, the Rev. Humphrey Mortimer, and the squire, Mr. Aylmer, both received supplies, 'with the Miss Crotchets' compliments,' when Winny died; but the doctor on that occasion was forgotten, he not being forgiven for the ill-timed nature of the event.

At sixty years of age Mr. Bolton Crotchet was still young, and incurably sanguine. He did not look above forty-five, and he did not feel above thirty. He had had no leisure to notice how his time went by; he took it and used it and passed it on, always with the determination of one day returning to England, and of letting it hang heavily upon his hands. Of late, by dying pretty freely, his sisters had reminded him that he was no longer young; and after Winny's departure he made up his mind that the time for his return to his native land had at length arrived.

Ten stone of him had gone out forty years before to Jamaica, and fifteen stone of him was coming back now, with a son and a daughter.

Mr. Crotchet would have preferred to leave his son behind him in Jamaica, that he might succeed to his own modes of life ; that he might carry out, in the management of the business, various prejudices in which he placed a reasonable faith. But at some period of their existence, occasionally indeed at all, sons are apt to be disappointing ; and John Crotchet proved so now. He had his own plan of life for himself, and first and foremost in it came the item of residence in an English university ; and in Jamaica he would not stay.

For such a state of things his father was wise enough to perceive that there was no remedy, but in the adjustment of his own ideal to the actual which stood stubbornly before him. He yielded therefore, preparing to bring over to England a youth silent, inflexible, unfashionable as to the habit of his mind and the

clothing of his body ; one who went contrary in all things to the family traditions, who loved what they hated and hated what they loved, or said that he did so. For names which in his family had been synonymous with ruin and disgrace, he professed veneration ; for opinions which had contributed to the loss of all their fortunes, he expressed admiration.

When he thus unburthened himself, his father merely remarked that he ‘ stated his case very fairly.’

After which it was curious to note that the son did not seem equally satisfied with the father.

Paternal partiality, even when disenchanted, can perhaps scarcely regard without a remnant of complacency that which it itself has been mainly instrumental in producing ; but filial respect less often owns any similar obligation. But Bolton Crotchet owned also a daughter, who was tall and slim, brown haired and piquante ; a girl with her mother’s eyes, fired

by her father's will. Otherwise she was so very unlike her father, and so very unlike her brother, that it sometimes occurred to her to wonder how she came to belong to them at all. She expected to find herself in sympathy with her aunts, and she was eagerly looking forward to making their acquaintance. They, on their side, were not anticipating any pleasure from their introduction to this the ninth Miss Crotchet.

They had never forgiven their brother for his marriage with the departed Creole. Of that bewitching little person they always spoke as 'the coloured woman.' Now this was too bad of the Miss Crotchets, for they had learnt quite enough of West Indian ways, from their father's and mother's conversations, to be well aware of the different estimation in which even the best nurtured Quadroon girl, and a Creole of good family, such as Augusta's mother had been, were held by the English. Having then never pardoned her marriage, they could still less

forgive her for having left behind her, not only a son, who might be accepted as the representative of his father, but also a daughter, and one who was by all accounts utterly unlike any Miss Crotchet that ever was seen. They were sure that this daughter would bring over with her unpleasing West Indian freedoms; that she would fully display all the faults of her mother's breeding, combined with the deficiencies of her father's bringing up.

Then, too, other and personal considerations influenced the old ladies. Their brother Bolton might himself have died childless and intestate, before the tale of their deaths was complete. This was a contingency unprovided for in Hobbes' will. In such an event, therefore, they might actually have re-inherited their own lost incomes, receiving back again as their brother's next-of-kin those sums which had already reverted to him, together with his own far larger fortune. Then good-bye to trustees and encumbrances: they might be free of them

all. Such things, they told each other, might have been; but such things were not, and Augusta was. To Bolton and to his son they could more easily pardon an inheritance which impoverished themselves, in consideration of the divine right of sex; but that one of their own too well known and despised kind should thus come to eat up their modest fortunes before their very faces, was too much! The following letter therefore was very unfavourably received.

St. Cecilia's, Jamaica.

DEAR AUNTS,—We are coming to England. You may expect us next autumn. My father says that forty years ago you had a vacant apartment, where he slept the last night before he left you. He begs that if this patriarchal chamber still exists, he may spend there the first night of his return to his native land.

Dear aunts, these are my words, but the fancy of the situation, the poetry of the position are all his. My father further inquires—Is

there a good house likely to be vacant shortly at Shellford-by-Shore?

Your affectionate niece,

AUGUSTA LA TOUCHE CROCHET.

In answer Miss Lilly wrote thus—

April, 1860.

DEAR BROTHER,—You should have written to us yourself. It is very rude to treat us so. We like respect when it is due. We have always kept the spare room as you left it. Your brushes and razors remain in the bureau, though you did give the razors to poor Sissey, who required them then more than you did yourself—or so you said; it was your joke. No stranger has ever slept in that room. It was the bed our parents laid on, and we have all been carried there when we died; but a pan of coals shall be put into it before you arrive. We are not used to quite young people, and there are very good lodgings in the Terrace.

Mr. Aylmer lives in the Squire's House, but he is ill and his life is despaired of, and the lease falls in on Michaelmas Day. We should like you to retake that.

Your sister,

LILLY CROCHET.

CHAPTER IV.

DOMESTIC RELATIONS.

‘WELL, father, here’s the charnel house they mean to put you into!’

Augusta Crotchet spoke. She was standing in the dingy room where, a few months before, her Aunt Winny had lain in the only state she ever knew, feebly thinking for the last time of only five and tenpence. Augusta had pulled up the blinds and had let in the unaccustomed light, and the rays of the setting sun were streaming now into the melancholy place. They were catching her own waving hair, and reflecting themselves in the light of her brown eyes. Bolton too stood blinking at the foot of the ancient bed; but the sun’s rays only made his pale grey eyes look watery, whilst Augusta’s

danced with animation. If there was one thing more striking than another about this southern girl, it was that she was so very much alive. ‘Think!’ she exclaimed, pointing as she spoke, ‘how many people have ended there; just in the middle of the second pillow! It’s horrible! father. A place to catch your death in.’

‘I was born there, my dear. It’s a queer thought that. Those are the same green hangings with figures on them, which used to turn into apes when I had the nightmare as a boy. Those are the posts I climbed up for the brass headings to throw them at the girls—the twins I mean. *What* old women your aunts have become, to be sure. Do I look like that? I suppose it’s trouble, poor souls! To be always counting yourselves and your shillings and finding them both getting fewer, must be distressing.’

So spoke the comfortable man of the world, who had multiplied himself and his money.

‘Hush! They are coming up. Which is it, Augusta? I could not tell one from another in that dark parlour below.’

‘It’s the twin, father, not the blind one—the other they call Rosy, and she looks like the kettle boiling over.’

‘Brother it’s time for tea; tea, I say.’

The sisters had acquired this habit of emphasising the chief word of a sentence, in consideration for Miss Fussy’s physical failing, or rather in consideration for themselves in dealing with her.

‘We had a leaf taken out of the table when Sissey and Polly died, and another for Nanny and Winny. It’s only a small square now: but they can sit at the side table.’

‘John and Augusta, you mean; certainly Rose. Put the young people behind you.’

‘Then you’ll put them where they will not stay;’ muttered Miss Lilly at the foot of the stairs. ‘Jack in the box is no name for them now-a-days.’

‘The girl does not resemble you, brother,’ said Rosy, ‘John does : only he’s not so good looking. Such a nice fair-skinned young man you were, when you went.’

‘You could tell she had come of a coloured woman,’ murmured Miss Lilly, as they sat down. Her brother overheard her, and frowned.

‘What has she got on?’ asked the blind aunt. ‘A pink frock and a sash that she sits upon ; might have changed it ; but perhaps she knows no better.’

Fussy and Rosy answered in concert, as though they had got a new doll, and were picking it to pieces between them.

‘My dear,’ said Posy, whose blindness made her curious about the girl, ‘are your ears pierced? Are her ears pierced, Rosy? I’ll lend her some drops of my own to save her sight.’

‘I cannot wear them, thank you, aunt, for my ears are not pierced. I think it a barbar-

ous custom, fit only for “a coloured woman.” This she added, looking firmly at her Aunt Lilly.

‘She is very rude,’ said Posy. ‘Where’s the butter? Where’s the butter, Rosy, and where’s Rebecca? Ring the bell.’ But nobody paid any attention. So Augusta got up and quietly did as the old woman wished. Presently Rebecca entered. She was an elderly maidservant, with an enormous white cap tied under her chin. In her hand she carried an old horsehair music stool. Having screwed this up, she perched herself upon it; three yards in a straight line behind Miss Lilly’s back. A worn spot in the carpet clearly indicated her precise position.

At this proceeding Bolton stared, and Miss Lilly hastened to explain.

‘Yes; we allow Rebecca to sit, upon the music stool. If she had a chair she would lean back. We like a servant in the room, but Rebecca gave us notice because she would not

stand, so we agreed to let her sit whenever there was no company. But there *is* company to-night, and she ought to stand.'

'Stand, Rebecca!' Shouted all the sisters at once. Rebecca descended grimly from her elevation.

'Miss Lilly,' she said, 'company is company, and brothers is brothers. The one isn't the other, and the other isn't the one. I hear the shrimp man calling. If you run short of water you can touch the bell.'

So saying, she departed, to the great discomfiture of the sisters.

Bolton and Augusta laughed merrily, and even the austere John smiled. Lilly, Fussy, and Rosy scolded in concert; whilst Augusta perched herself upon the forsaken stool. Meanwhile Posy, feeling a general sense of things strange and uneasy, began to cry.

Posy was becoming unhappy in the isolation which was growing up around her. Everyone but herself seemed quite reconciled to her

blindness. No one took the gristle off the meat, no one picked the bones from out the fishes : attentions which they were quite ready carefully to pay to the cat ! but then she was not exactly one of themselves. Somehow she had never realised before that her brother would come back to her in the darkness only ; that she should hear, but would be quite unable to see him. This discovery was a great blow to her ; also the strangeness of this new niece, the peculiarity of these fresh voices, and above all the queer sound of laughter, bewildered and upset her. She began to cry with bigger and bigger tears, and not all the admonitions of her sisters could stop her. To be told she was ‘stupid,’ was ‘rude,’ was ‘a fool,’ did not shock her. She had too long been accustomed to the severest form of domestic criticism, that of sisters who have always lived together.

The Miss Crotchets had from each other no merciful refuge ; nor was it ever permitted to any one to escape from the pitiless judgment of

the rest. Each thought that she knew all, and had felt all, that the others could possibly have known or felt, and that in consequence she might say all that it pleased her to say.

To them separate experiences had never brought silence ; absence had never come to teach doubt ; nor had length of years produced any increase of mutual respect. If, however, her sisters' words took no effect upon Posy, their influence upon their brother was decided enough.

‘Come, come, Posy,’ he said kindly ; ‘it is hard upon you, isn’t it, hearing us all and seeing nobody ? I shall take you up to town next week to see a man about your eyes.’

‘She won’t *see* him,’ said Fussy with a grin, and the other sisters chuckled at what they took to be a joke. This completed the disgust of the new comers. Augusta sprang off the music stool, from which she had been surveying the party, whilst her father exclaimed—

‘Take your aunt out upon the terrace,

Augusta. She will be the better for the air this mild evening. Comfort her,' he whispered.

'She can't go,' cried Miss Rosy. 'She never goes out without me, and I am not ready, and "Gin" is not going; he has caught cold.'

Gin was Miss Lilly's dog, a rough-coated and rather vulgar terrier, attached to whose collar by a string Miss Posy was daily in the habit of pacing the terrace, observing, it is to be feared, a somewhat devious course.

'She is going out now with Augusta,' repeated Bolton decisively. 'And you, John, go and get lodgings for yourself and your sister. Number four, I think you said, Elizabeth?'

Miss Lilly had never been so addressed since the day she was christened. It had a great effect upon her, making her feel a new and responsible sort of person. Her brother's manner cowed her too, a good deal.

'There will probably be all our luggage coming down to-morrow,' said Bolton.

‘To-morrow? To-morrow?’ asked the sisters, and each one looked at the other.

‘Yes, to-morrow. Why not? What reason is there against to-morrow?’

‘Oh, nothing particular,’ answered Fussy and Rosy; but as they spoke they glanced at Miss Lilly, and she in her turn stared at the teapot.

Then Bolton perceived that there was something ‘particular’ against to-morrow, and that they had said the thing that was not, for indeed these old ladies had privately determined to bar up the Terrace, heedless of the expected arrival of their brother’s possessions.

Having with much difficulty got her aunt enveloped in many shawls, Augusta took her out into the fresh sea air. There, leaning upon the young girl’s arm, the old woman was coaxed into confiding in her. She confessed, under promise of secrecy, that the darkness which surrounded her had of late become absolute; that she could not obtain one

glimpse of their faces ; but that for her her brother still existed, only as a pale-faced youth with a man's voice.

That was a memorable evening for Posy when, by reason of her one individual experience, she stepped out from the monotonous rank of her sisters, and in mournfully confronting her special sorrow found herself in the presence of a special comforter also, in the person of the hitherto mistrusted Augusta.

CHAPTER V.

DR. BERNARD LANSDOWNE.

SHELLFORD-BY-SHORE had, about a year and a half before this time, been enlivened by the appearance of a new doctor. He succeeded to no one's practice; no one knew exactly where he came from, or indeed why he came at all.

Mr. Rudge had lived among them for thirty years, and it had hitherto been supposed that he kept their old and ailing relatives alive quite long enough. He was also considered to have sufficiently provided for the vulgar necessities of the lower part of the community when he established a provident dispensary, to be presided over by himself but served by his assistant, Mr. Timlings, as his representative.

Without any great stretch of the marine imagination, it might easily be believed, down in the boatmen's quarter, that young Mr. Timlings got all the advantage of old Mr. Rudge's experience. Whether or not Mr. Timlings thought this advice worth going to fetch, or Mr. Rudge thought it worth stopping to give, it was as well perhaps that no one exactly inquired.

Mr. Rudge was a practitioner of an old-fashioned sort. He looked upon his patients very much as persons possessing such and such advantages, as members of society in Shellford ; very little as cases offering such and such points of interest for the pathological inquirer.

The importance of the individual himself was in fact, for Mr. Rudge, the measure of the importance of the disease.

Had it been otherwise, he might well have discovered that the attack of gout, which was keeping Squire Aylmer so long a prisoner to his big south room at the 'Squire's House,' was

in itself a far less instructive affliction than many a neglected complaint in the village.

The display of any other kind of feeling would, it is true, have been observed by the majority of Mr. Rudge's patients with distrust. An undesirably curious frame of mind on the part of the medical investigator might tend even to the preservation of the disease itself, as a field for experiment. There were the hospitals for all that.

So Mr. Rudge cured all his patients in the stereotyped way ; and when he failed to cure them, wished them well, or even better ; then turned to the consolation of their afflicted relatives, with common sense followed by sedatives.

After which he duly appeared at their funerals to the entire satisfaction of all surviving parties ; and of the others who can speak ?

One morning, however, during Nanny Crotchet's last illness, Miss Lilly had received an unaccustomed letter from Dr. Dodds, of

Bellingham. Its object was, 'to recommend to their notice,' his clever young friend Dr. Lansdowne; who, 'hearing that there was an opening at Shellford-by-Shore for a rising physician, intended to settle in that desirable place.'

The sisters were puzzled. To lose no time in making yourself agreeable to a pushing doctor must surely be to fall ill at once. Yet there stood Mr. Rudge, spectacles on nose, regarding Nanny, as he had already regarded Sissey and Polly; and there stood his physic bottles, labelled in rows.

Mr. Rudge's bottles all wore bands; after a fashion common enough once; but exploded now, both among parsons and phials.

The situation was undoubtedly perplexing; and in her perplexity Miss Lilly handed him the note. Thereupon he actually accused her, innocent Lilly, of having said that there was that 'opening.' No one else could—he affirmed—have supplied the missing link, between

Bernard Lansdowne and Shellford. Dr. Dodds declared that the new comer was 'a man of family.' Well, Mr. Rudge came of a family too; he was one of the nine sons and daughters of old Dr. Rudge, the same who wrote on 'Respiration;' but he had not found that kind of family any stepping-stone to advancement. And 'a man of fortune,' added Dr. Dodds. Mr. Rudge had been planning to save for the last twenty years; but somehow it all went, in a boy and a gig.

The consciousness of her innocence did not support Miss Lilly, when Mr. Rudge flung down the letter, and departed in wrath. Nor was it ever discovered in Shellford who it was that had mentioned that 'opening.' Indeed, it was even hinted that it had never existed at all, until Dr. Lansdowne came and made it for himself. He took No. 3 in 'The Terrace.' He called upon the sisters Crotchet, with Dr. Dodds' introduction, and drove his big carriage through the narrow streets, as though they

swarmed with patients for him. Had he come there as a poor man with his way to make, he would never have made it; but he offered himself with the confidence of a man whose position is already secure, and he was accepted accordingly. Popular opinion decided that there was comfort in knowing you need not now leave the world upon Mr. Rudge's verdict alone; but might give yourself a second chance.

Whilst allowing Dr. Lansdowne to feel its pulse, society was however of opinion that his good looks and his grand air were scarcely sufficient warrant for receiving him into its closer embrace. Some further information as to his antecedents was generally felt to be necessary; and this was precisely what it was most difficult to obtain.

Dr. Dodds having died soon after sending his letter of introduction, could not be applied to again; and the Miss Crotchets declined to make any other inquiries out of consideration for Mr. Rudge.

Dr. Lansdowne had appeared upon the scene, with two children, a boy and a girl, calling him ‘Papa;’ but no lady had come to represent ‘Mamma.’ This was interesting. So handsome a man must surely have had a history : romantic certainly ; melancholy perhaps. He wore, what hatters call ‘a medium-sized band.’ The children too were dressed in grey. ‘Was it for their dear mamma?’ The vicar’s wife put the question when she looked in one morning on her way down to the boatmen’s quarter.

Mrs. Mortimer had heard that Dr. Lansdowne was visiting cases there ‘all out of his own pocket.’ The people were full of his benevolence ; and she felt that payment was due to him in the shape of the thanks of the Church, as represented by herself. With this coin, as a ready return for deeds of charity, the good woman was always amply provided. It was thus that she met his little children, and put the momentous question in the hall—

‘Was it for their dear mamma?’

The nurse 'did not know.' 'Could not say.' 'Had only just come.' 'Had not heard whether the children had ever had a mother.' And whilst she was speaking the doctor appeared and invited her in.

The Reverend Humphrey Mortimer was a worthy man enough. The flame of his affections had sufficed for years to keep a steady glow alight upon the domestic hearth. When her husband's eyes rested upon her, Mrs. Mortimer dutifully trusted that they still found there all that his heart could desire. They had several healthy children, and Mrs. Mortimer was not accustomed to trouble herself much about anything or anybody else in relation to herself.

But when she was confronted by this new doctor, and met his questioning gaze, a strange trouble ran through the good woman's frame. She found herself blushing and embarrassed, although she had come there to patronise him. She wished, too, that she had had on her Sunday

bonnet instead of an old parish hat. All the thanks with which she meant to have rewarded him died before reaching her lips. As to the questions which she had confidently intended to put, she marvelled now that she could ever have conceived them. By shifting her chair she presently managed to get out of the direct line of his critical glances; and she contrived to murmur an expression of sympathy for his ‘motherless children,’ together with an invitation to them to come to tea with her better provided ones.

Dr. Lansdowne accepted the particular invitation; whilst he acquiesced in the sympathetic observation as in one generally applicable.

In due course of time his children appeared at Mrs. Mortimer’s nursery table. There they were plied with cake and questions, accepting the one and rejecting the other with a persistency which did credit to their years.

‘Was mamma gone?’—‘Yes.’

‘ But is papa gone ? ’—‘ Yes,’ too, ‘ All gone ! ’—especially the cake. So the Mortimers gave it up in despair.

In the absence of authentic information, therefore, Shellford decided for itself that the doctor was a widower ; that he had lost his wife at the birth of her second child ; that cutting himself off, after this untoward event, from his former surroundings, he had finally been directed to their peaceful locality in search of retirement.

A theory at once so natural and so flattering to the feelings of Shellford society could not fail to be accepted ; and by the time Mr. Bolton Crotchet arrived in the place the best informed had no longer any doubt upon the subject, and could scarcely have recalled by a distinct effort of memory what really was known about Dr. Lansdowne.

So certain, indeed, was society about him that already it was anxious to provide a second Mrs. Lansdowne, who might adorn the little

town with many striking likenesses of its handsomest inhabitant.

Such an arrangement might possibly diminish the embarrassment of wives and daughters beneath the scrutiny of his questioning eyes. He could not look quite as he did now, when he had a wife of his own and a second family. Or if he did, his looks must certainly be taken to be emptied of all significance which they might presently have.

As to the real import of these remarkable looks, feminine society in its secret soul was uncertain ; nor could it, by applying to its male relatives, obtain any solution of the difficulty, for the husbands and fathers saw nothing, where they themselves saw so much. That which they were attempting to investigate lay outside the reach of masculine cognisance, possibly in that disputed region wherein facts are feelings ; but feelings are not necessarily facts.

On the other hand there is this to be

observed, that if you face an inquisitive lady as if you knew all about her, you divert her attention from the question of how much she knows about you ; that in awakening her self-consciousness you have stirred an emotion capable of quenching curiosity itself.

CHAPTER VI.

ACROSS THE BAR.

IT must be confessed that the first days of Mr. Crotchet's return to his sisters' house did not tempt him to prolong his visit ; nor were Mrs. Brigg's lodgings for his son and daughter much to his mind.

After so many years spent in the careful gathering of money ; after so much discreet management and cautious expenditure, he had no idea of settling down quietly and unostentatiously in 'The Terrace.' If he lived in Shellford at all, he must be the first man in it, living in the first house, and that was 'The Squire's.'

A kindly regard for his old sisters, and the consideration of his own dignity, induced Bolton Crotchet to think, that could he secure posses-

sion of this his father's old abode, he might very well spend there a portion at least of every year. But a portion only ; for London was attracting him, as it attracts most men who have long been absent from their native land.

In London, however, as an unknown man, he would have his position to make, whilst in Shellford it was ready made for him. There he might carry out some of the careful projects which he had formed in Jamaica. There, he might establish his beloved daughter as the admired mistress of his house. There, when tired of being a little man in town, he could always return, to be the big man of the county.

With these thoughts in his mind he arose one morning, shortly after his arrival, from the suffocating embraces of the green bed. Upon his plate, on the breakfast table, lay a letter from Mr. Aylmer, written by his daughter's hand, requesting an extension of the lease of the 'Squire's House,' now to expire shortly. The old lease of forty years, which

had been granted after Hobbes' death, would fall in at Michaelmas, and Bolton had determined not to renew it ; but Mr. Aylmer was said to be dying, and he could scarcely be turned out until ready for the churchyard. Therefore Bolton hastened to inquire of Miss Lilly what were Mr. Aylmer's precise expectations of life.

‘ Who is attending him, Elizabeth ? ’

Bolton had determined to go on calling Miss Lilly by her full name, since he had observed the desirable moral effects produced by the unusual sound.

‘ Elizabeth ! who is his doctor ? Is it Rudge ? The man asks me to let him stop where he is a year longer. I am much disposed to send him the answer of the King of Israel to Naaman the Syrian. It's taking an unfair advantage, when a man makes inconvenient requests from his deathbed. As if *I* had the killing of him ! Who has ? That's what I want to know.’

‘Ah!’ said Fussy triumphantly, ‘he wants to know it, Lilly. He wants to know it, he said. Didn’t I tell you he would, and I’ll tell him too. Deaf and dumb don’t always go together whatever you may think. Brother’—but her intended communication was cut short, for the door burst open and Rebecca rushed in—‘Mr. Crotchet, sir; please to step to the window. There is all your luggage come down, and a tan-skinned young varlet (she meant valet) with it. And there’s two flys full of sick children for No. 5’s lodgings, that can’t get out and walk. And there’s Dr. Lansdowne’s carriage and horses that won’t be able to get along the Terrace. My stars! Miss Lilly, whatever will you be doing next?’

‘Rebecca!’ shrieked four indignant voices.

‘Well, yes, I know I should not have said it before company, and gentlemen too; but there’s nothing particular in stars, and it’s a mercy I didn’t name anything else. Your manners do slip you so living alone with ladies.

Mr. Crotchet, sir, Miss Lilly has been and barred up the end of the Terrace, on this of all mornings in the year. Just step to the window and look. She'd lock us all out of heaven, Miss Lilly would, if ever she got the chance to steal the keys of Peter.'

This last remark was added in an under tone.

'The landlady at No. 5 is going to give up the house, if this sort of thing is to happen,' she continued, addressing herself still to Bolton, 'and they say the same all along. Miss Sissey always had the bar put up on a fine Sunday once in a way ; there could not be any objection to that ; *she* never served people so. Dr. Lansdowne does not know anything about it yet ; but he will do, as soon as he comes out, and I wouldn't be the woman to lock him in for a trifle. I'd rather he was on one side of a bar and me on the other, if it came to that. I'd have another key made to the padlock out of my own pocket, before I'd stand this worry many days in the year. They all come repre-

sending to *me*, so I've just set the street-door wide open and they may walk in and say their
• 'say here.'

'It's the right-of-way, brother ; we're forced to put up the bar,' explained Miss Lilly, it must be confessed somewhat apologetically.

'Forced to put up the bar when you knew my things were coming? Why, I told you so last week !'

'I told you so last week,' parrotted Fussy in an aggravating tone.

Miss Lilly, bending her head over her dog Gin, mentioned that there was 'a cat in the corner.' There was not ; but like many another excellent dog Gin enjoyed a lie, and kept up the fiction by barking distractingly. This was what his mistress desired. Rosy arranged her countenance into the best imitation of perfect neutrality that came at command ; and Posy turned her sightless eyes in the direction of her niece—whose impression of all this she was seeking to know.

Augusta, meanwhile, looking in her white dress and mauve ribbons all the fresher for the faded forms around her, stood in the window, contemplating with amusement the small crowd at the end of the terrace.

‘The butcher can’t deliver the leg, and it can’t walk from the corner; and the grocer won’t bring along the candles, and leave his barrow among that lot of boys.’

Rebecca hoped by giving the inconvenience a purely personal aspect, to work upon Miss Lilly’s feelings.

Augusta’s face rippled over with smiles. She meant to interfere soon; but first she must let her father explode the wrath that was clearly working in him.

Before he could speak, however, somebody knocked at the room door: a loud, impatient knock, and being nearest to it she turned and opened it. Looking up, she saw herself, her own flower-like head and laughing eyes, reflected in the glass of Mrs. Hobbes Crotchet’s

picture over the doorway, and below it she caught a second representation of herself in another pair of eyes, darker and larger than her own. Eyes, which at the first glance were very far from smiling, but which at the second, had caught mirth and surprise from her face.

Dr. Lansdowne, for he it was who entered, had hitherto seen nothing funny in being kept forcibly a prisoner when he ought to have been far away on his rounds. He had come in expecting to confront Miss Lilly, cross and determined as usual, in one of her most aggravating moods about that wretched iron bar, by the intolerable abuse of which she was accustomed to control the neighbourhood. He had confidently expected to find her sitting in her old black cap and her rusty gown, surrounded by her three sisters, all as uninteresting to him as herself. Instead of which, here, upon the very threshold of the dreary room, he was confronted by the smiling presence of this unknown girl. Then it was that the possibility of looking at

the matter in the light of a joke—though a bad one—first occurred to him.

With a critical glance he noted the perfect outlines of the bright face that confronted his ; the clearness of the eyes that never seemed to have faded since first they looked upon a dusty world ; the golden brown of the hair, which was tortured into no hideous fashion, but strayed around her forehead at its own free will ; the whole making up a picture that held him whilst he looked at it. It took only a moment to learn ; but how many years to forget ? Or would he ever forget it at all ?

Bolton Crotchet turned at the entrance of the new-comer ; swallowing his worst words at the sight of him.

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Crotchet,’ said the doctor, advancing directly towards Miss Lilly. ‘I thought you were alone. I came in to lodge my complaint.’

‘Complaint, sir ! I should think so. I am the brother of these ladies, Mr. Bolton Crotchet,

and I have returned to England after forty years to find myself locked in and out like a burglar. We're not used to these ways in the West. Now, Elizabeth, where's that key?'

'Miss Crotchet!' pleaded the other, 'I really am very much pressed for time this morning, and I can't get my horses out. We have no exit behind these houses, sir; and I must beg you to procure my release.' 'I'm due at the Squire's House now, Miss Crotchet. I have an urgent message. Mr. Aylmer may be *in articulo*. You surely cannot intend to persist——'

'In making yourself a public nuisance,' finished her angry brother.

'Going out! Gin!' whispered Lilly. And that credulous animal, flying at the door, set up a series of hysteric yells.

'Elizabeth!' shouted her brother, raising his voice above the dog's. 'Am I to leave your house this afternoon?'

'Hoity! Toity! What a fuss! Such

things have happened before, and they'll happen again,' said the lady thus addressed.

'They will not happen again while I am here,' said Bolton. 'I very much question if you four have any more right over that bar than that child Augusta has. I'll have that point cleared up for your benefit, sir, and that of all the other tenants. The rents of these houses are paid to trustees; and it's my belief that they are the only people who have any authority in the matter.'

'Aunt!' whispered Augusta softly to Miss Posy, 'where has my Aunt Elizabeth put that key? Whisper; and I'll go and let the people in and out; it will be fun.'

'Is Lilly near? No? You'll not tell of me? Well, then, it's just slipped in the left-hand watch-pocket hanging over her bed. Don't tell.' But Augusta was off.

She did not succeed, however, in eluding the notice of one watchful pair of eyes; and as Dr. Lansdowne held the door open for her, a

shy look of intelligence on her part and of amused significance on his passed between them. Her look said as plainly as possible: 'This is all very tiresome and ridiculous; but I mean to be mistress of the situation.' And his answered: 'Oh! I don't mind so much after all; to find you here is such an agreeable surprise.'

No; as a *man* he did not mind waiting so much, even if Mr. Aylmer were dangerously ill; but, as a *doctor*, he determined to be free immediately; and he stayed for her coming back, only because he had read in her face that she would bring deliverance with her.

For a few seconds more Miss Lilly sat knitting in obstinate silence; then a rush of wheels, and the sound of men and horses' feet clattering along the terrace, sent her hurrying to the window.

The bar was up; swinging loosely to and fro. Half a score of idle lads hanging on it. Her niece was running back bareheaded

along the terrace, with the key of the padlock upon her fingers. Dr. Lansdowne's carriage was at the door, as were the carts with the luggage; and trunks, meat, men, and candles were all making a triumphant entry together.

‘There's my carriage! *Many* thanks, Miss Crotchet. I'm off now.’ With a smiling face and an extended hand Dr. Lansdowne approached Miss Lilly, as though she herself had released him.

‘It's a mistake,’ she stammered; but he was gone.

Bolton called him back, however. Now that this gentleman's mind was relieved by the fortunate termination of his quarrel with his sister, his thoughts resumed their former course.

‘Dr. Lansdowne, you are attending Mr. Aylmer. Will you give me, as a favour, your candid opinion of the case? Purely as a matter of business. I will explain the circumstances.’

Dr. Lansdowne's face did not look en-

couraging; but, for reasons of his own, he mastered his annoyance.

‘I’ll look in again this evening, if Miss Crotchet will allow me.’

Miss Crotchet looked as if she would rather have allowed him to take himself off for ever.

‘I literally have not a moment to spare.’

He found the moment, however, when he met Mr. Crotchet’s daughter upon the doormat.

‘So many thanks,’ said he, with a friendly smile. ‘We are all deeply indebted to one Miss Crotchet at least. I hope we may meet again this evening.’

Augusta did not particularly desire it.

‘We have had enough of him already,’ she said to her brother, who met her at the door. ‘I don’t like that sort of man. I believe he is conceited. He stares unpleasantly too. If he were my doctor, I should even be shy of dying before him.’

‘What greater compliment could you pay to a medical man?’ suggested John, turning away.

‘Life seems very perplexing in England. Shall I grow in time, I wonder, to be the living image of my blessed Aunt Elizabeth!’ Augusta sighed as she lingered for a moment with her back to the open doorway and her face towards the sea. ‘For the first time in my life,’ she thought, ‘I had rather be where I am not. I wish I were floating away from it all, home to our dear St. Cecilia’s. This is cowardice,’ she added, rousing herself. ‘Now for it.’

And with the key on her finger, she plunged boldly into the agitated bosom of her family.

The Fates had been abroad on the evening before; visiting the dull village by the sea; flying in the silence of night on the wings of the wind; inspiring into Miss Lilly’s bosom that unfortunate conviction of her own importance, and that mischievous determination to impose it upon her harmless neighbours by means of her much-abused sceptre of iron.

Poor, stupid Lilly did more than put up the bar that day. More than give the sick

children colds which they did not lose for a month. More than make her brother angry, and his man sin by swearing. More than cause Miss Aylmer's tears at the doctor's delay in visiting her father. That one morning's work gave her more to answer for than all the rest of her own and her sisters' blundering lives.

In spite of many opposing circumstances from the far ends of the earth, all unknowing and unsuspecting, she had brought two human souls together at the bar of their fate.

CHAPTER VII.

A PARISH PARTY.

IN Shellford the vicar's wife annually gave an entertainment of the kind known as 'parish parties.'

This term was intended as an indication that the limits assigned to her hospitality were geographic, rather than social or conventional. On these occasions might be encountered all the unknown members of society. Upon the vicarage lawn might be met persons for whose festive appearance in public no precedent could be found, save at church. All those who were shabby and genteel, those who were genteel but not shabby. The reduced ladies who lived in lodgings, together with the

decayed gentlewomen who let them. The people whom nobody knew, and the people whom nobody liked. Those that had just risen, together with those that had just retired. Those that had made their money, in juxtaposition with those that had lost it. All here were mixed up together, once and once only in the course of the year; in utter disregard of their worldly pretensions. A humble member not inaptly described its combining elements, when in order to flatter Mrs. Mortimer she said, that it was 'like a little heaven below.'

Unfortunately the geographic method of selection proved no bar to the entrance of many pious discords.

Mr. Mortimer was accustomed upon these occasions to deliver an address; gathered up from the fragments that remained of last Sunday's discourse, or more imprudently still drawn from the supplies of the forthcoming Sunday. His peculiar style might not inappropriately be described, in the words of his wine

merchant's catalogue, as the 'good, sound ordinary'—equally opposed to the 'short and dry' and to the 'highly flavoured.'

Such an opportunity was now in view. Mrs. Mortimer preferred conveying her invitations to her more important guests personally, and in an apologetic form. She made this errand the excuse for a visit to the Miss Crotchets.

She had heard of the arrival of their brother and his family, with all the particulars which the tongue of gossip could give; and she had faithfully passed on all she had heard, with the stamp of the vicarage authority. But in truth her curiosity remained unsatisfied. Little that was definite had been told her; and she felt it was high time that she saw and heard for herself.

On the evening of the same day as that on which Augusta had raised the blockade of the Terrace, Mrs. Mortimer walked up the steps of the Garden House. Her best bonnet was on her

head, and her cardcase was in her hand, yet she did not, in spite of the formality of appearances, exactly intend to call on the Bolton Crotchets, or to include them in her invitation.

She was not sure if Augusta's age or her father's position necessitated such a step. She meant 'to act according to circumstances.' Circumstances have, however, an awkward trick of baffling those that trust to them. They are given to forming unprecedented combinations; and this was Mrs. Mortimer's experience now.

Rebecca said 'Yes.' She might 'walk in;' but there was 'company.'

'Who?' 'Well, Mr Crotchet, and Mr. John, Miss Augusta, and Dr. Lansdowne.'

Mrs. Mortimer went in. She had fully expected to see an elderly gentleman, of a certain portliness, with a red complexion, the result of exposure to the burning sun. She knew all about that. She had learnt how, since some excellent people in England had given their children pence instead of sugar, the slaves

had all been abolished. She knew how hard in consequence the masters had to work themselves: so that it was *they* who now wished they 'were but in the grave' and all their 'labour done.'

She was quite ready to believe that 'out there,' where there was 'no one to see,' the Miss Crotchets' brother had manufactured all his sugar himself, with much sweat of his peeling brow. She could well credit that he had first grown and finally roasted, with his own fingers, all the coffee that he had sent to Shellford. No wonder if he had spoilt the fair complexion that his sisters spoke of. Mrs. Mortimer had a notion that everybody emigrated in order to do something, which it would be indecent for them to do in England. She was also fully prepared to find in John Crotchet an awkward young man; but she was not prepared for Augusta's appearance.

In the absence of precise information, her imagination had conjured up a tall bold girl,

in grass green. She had heard ‘those people liked bright colours.’

She had already turned over in her mind the question as to whether the family would be likely to speak English, and whilst considering the duties devolving upon herself and her husband, as the overseers of these benighted strangers, had wondered whether a few tracts, applicable to the ‘Heathen,’ would be out of place if offered to them.

Mrs. Mortimer had been to school when she was young; and we have seen that she knew all about Jamaica—except indeed, where it was—but it must be confessed that in a subsequent account of her visit, given to her husband, she declared that she had ‘found that foreign girl singing Indian songs with Dr. Lansdowne.’ She had, she added, ‘felt so sorry for the old ladies.’

As a matter of fact, when she entered the room, Dr. Lansdowne was endeavouring to coax, out of an obstinate old piano, an accompani-

ment to an Italian song, which Augusta had somewhat unwillingly consented to sing. Her father would, she knew, find even the jangle of its crazy keys a pleasanter accompaniment to his evening slumbers than the cross-fire of his sisters' criticisms.

‘So sorry to disturb such a pleasant family party,’ said Mrs. Mortimer, subsiding nervously into the corner of a most uncomfortable sofa.

‘It isn’t pleasant,’ answered Lilly, ‘not pleasant at all. Pleasures take fetching. Families come of themselves.’

‘So I find,’ replied Mrs. Mortimer.

‘Pleasant, indeed, to have such noises in your ears!’

‘Through and through your head,’ said Fussy. So pleased was she poor soul to be able to speak of anything she had really heard.

‘Don’t *you* talk about noises in the ears,’ rejoined Lilly crossly. ‘It would be well you heard more of them. You see our brother Bolton, Mrs Mortimer? That is him asleep in

the corner. I'd introduce you if he was awake. He ordered in that box of music'—pointing to the piano—'for the girl this afternoon. It has been too much for "Gin." It gave him the horrors and he howled till he couldn't stand. He took it for a chest full of Toms and Tabbies. Rebecca had to take him off to bed. I'd a good mind she should take me too. We were best all in bed, I think; we shall only do worse out of it, young and old both. Our brother says he can't sleep on good English feathers. Declares he lay awake all last night in the green room; the room over this, you know. Such faddles!'

'Ah! I daresay,' said Mrs. Mortimer. 'I have heard they lie on the doormats in those outlandish places; but he'll appreciate the comfort of a good bed soon, I don't doubt. Excuse my asking, Miss Crotchet' (and she lowered her voice, to Fussy's despair, who sat well forward, with her hand behind her best ear, in vain); 'excuse the question; but are they used to society at all? I came to ask if

you and your sisters would join our next parish gathering?'

'Well, I don't know, at all, Mrs. Mortimer. Folks that haven't got the full use of their senses had best stop at home and shift as they can. That's what I am always telling Fussy and Posy. And as to *them*—well, I think Rosy and I might safely bring our nephew John. That is he sitting over in the window reading.'

'He seems a nice quiet fellow.'

'Yes, yes, he is very well mannered. We don't like the girl; we're not comfortable with her; but he is no trouble at all. Only speaks when there's anything that should be said. You wouldn't know he was a young man at all, except you looked at him.'

Mrs. Mortimer, who was scarcely so much disposed to consider manhood in the light of a disqualification, made no direct answer to this observation.

'Well, perhaps he will come with you then? It's on Tuesday fortnight.'

‘Yes, yes, he’ll come. I suppose he can slip his book in his pocket ; and I can just sling my knitting on my wrist, in case there’s nothing to do ? He may as well learn all about the entertainment of the Odds and Ends, in case he’s going to be a parson.’

‘I don’t know that our parties are particularly odd,’ said Mrs. Mortimer, nettled more by the truth than by the freedom of the remark.

‘*She* is odd,’ put in Fussy, pointing at Augusta, and having as usual caught up and misunderstood the emphasised word. ‘What do you think she did this morning ? She stole the key of the padlock, and she took down the bar when Lilly had put it up. She let him out’—pointing at Dr. Lansdowne,—‘and all the rest of the world in. Then she came flying along the pavement like a loose hat in a gale of wind, with all the lads at her heels. Such an unseemly thing to do. And our brother took her part.’

‘What did the doctor say?’ asked Mrs. Mortimer, her mouth watering for more gossip.

‘Grinned like a cat, and——’

‘Cats don’t grin,’ interposed Lilly, ‘that’s a falsehood. Terriers do. “Gin” does; but cats don’t.’

‘And said he would “look in again,”’ proceeded Fussy. ‘As if we kept a house of call! Then Lilly said to our niece—Sister, tell Mrs. Mortimer what you said.’

‘What I said,’ replied Lilly, not without proper pride, ‘was this:—“Young woman, there’s a bar and a padlock too, on the front door of this house as well as at the end of the terrace; and the next time you take upon yourself to take down one, I shall take upon myself to put up the other, with you on the wrong side of it.” No one can meddle with your right to fasten up your own front door, I believe, whichever side of it your relations may chance to be. There’s a right-of-way we all possess, and that’s in and out of our own

house. Well, that's what I threatened : and it's only what dear Papa would have done to any one of us that so misconducted ourselves ; but we knew better.'

'Yes, we knew better,' chorused Fussy and Rosy : only Posy's feeble voice was heard, urging this unlikely plea for forbearance for her niece :—'I might have done it, I think, when I was young.'

'Ah, we must hope she'll improve,' said Mrs. Mortimer politely. 'We don't know what their ways are, out there.' She said 'out there' to save her geography. 'She may not have been accustomed to the rights of property, toll-bars, boundaries, and all that sort of thing. I understand it's dreadfully lawless in that part of the world. One as good as another ; and no brick walls. Everybody just taking what he can get, and doing what he likes best ; and slaves (that were at least) and heathen, and men and women, and white and black, and good and bad, and all colours mixed up

together. It must be deplorable for the manners of the young.'

As she spoke she looked doubtfully at the girl, who was paying no attention to all this conversation, but was listening to Dr. Lansdowne. That gentleman, seated upon the music-stool, was talking rapidly, with much reference to the pages of a music-book open before them. Among his other accomplishments it appeared that he understood music, both practically and scientifically.

Now, however, he rose, looking in Mr. Crotchet's direction.

'Dr. Lansdowne, pray don't let my father keep you up,' said Augusta smiling.

'He's asleep,' said Miss Lilly bluntly; 'and it's time we all were.'

'You do not like music then, Miss Crotchet?'

'Music! no,' answered Miss Lilly. 'I'll wait till I get to heaven for mine. When I see a healthy young man five-fingering it away,

I say to myself, there is one that must just be waiting for death, with nothing else to do but to get ready. I'd have a harp if I was you while I was about it. Who ever heard of an angel playing on a cottage piano?'

'Yes,' said Rosy; 'that is what dear Mamma always said. "They play on harps up above: so give me a harp."'

'She has got one now,' said Posy kindly.

It was Mrs. Mortimer's presence which must have suggested these serious reflections to the Miss Crotchets: that good lady meanwhile was endeavouring to engage John Crotchet's attention. But it was not easy to explain to him the nature of her invitation, with Augusta standing before her waiting to be recognised. Then, too, there was Dr. Lansdowne; must she invite them all? Dr. Lansdowne never came to church, and she felt that this fact warranted his exclusion from her lawn. Mr. Rudge, of course, would be there. He was a churchwarden and part of the institution. But

there stood the young doctor before her, making her feel as nervous as possible, until suddenly she heard herself saying quite humbly, and to her own surprise, 'May we hope to have the pleasure of seeing you also, Dr. Lansdowne? It is not much of an affair. Quite a quiet gathering. I know I really ought not to ask such a busy man; but if you have nothing better to do——.'

And he answered quite condescendingly that, 'Indeed,' he was 'very busy, very busy indeed;' but that if he 'could be of any service', he would 'be pleased to look in.'

He spoke as if he would be doing her a favour. Mr. Rudge was double his age, and yet he was quite thankful to come. He was there early helping to arrange the chairs; he undertook all the elderly people, and spoke to the insignificant ones; finally, he went home last, and said that it 'had all gone off well.'

Certainly his young rival had a high opinion of himself.

It was too much for Mrs. Mortimer, so she took her leave, politely hoping that Mr. Crotchet and Augusta would also be of the party. Thus she had undeniably done the correct thing all round : which did not in the present instance give her its accustomed satisfaction.

Dr. Lansdowne lingered only to give Mr. Crotchet a professionally guarded reply as to Mr. Aylmer's condition ; then he, too, departed, shaking hands with the four original Miss Crotchets, as though the operation were by no means a pleasant one ; and with the youngest, as though he found something in the touch of her hand which made him unwilling to part with it.

This fastidious man had one peculiarity, most awkward for a rising doctor, namely, ' a dislike,' as he himself phrased it, ' to the casual manipulation of unsympathetic surfaces.'

CHAPTER VIII.

IN FANCY FREE.

SOME days afterwards a roll of music was left for Augusta at the Garden House by the nurse and children from No. 3.

She took it into the drawing-room, and turning over the leaves idly, tried the songs by snatches. They were some which Dr. Lansdowne had recommended to her, and they had evidently been sung by his wife ; for the names ‘Janet,’ ‘Mrs. Lansdowne,’ were indifferently written upon them, with dates of a few years back.

Augusta had heard the Shellford story, of the death of Dr. Lansdowne’s young wife, and now as she turned this music over, she sought

for some traces of the girl whose past history was thus brought before her. Only one song offered the slightest clue to her individuality. It was a slight and unfinished composition, in which Mrs. Lansdowne had evidently set the music to words for herself. It was signed 'Janet,' and was slipped in as though by an oversight.

But slight as it was, it seemed to Augusta that it breathed a spirit which had lived once, and that spirit was one of hopelessly disappointed affection.

The words of the song were the ordinary thing, about a 'lover' not 'coming from distant seas,' and so on; and to Augusta herself they meant nothing. For her, so far as she was at present aware, no lover had started either by land or sea. The future might produce him, as it might also the 'winged cats,' with threats of whose appearance Miss Lilly perpetually tortured her dog 'Gin'; but as yet the lover and the cats delayed. Whereas

to this now silent girl surely he must have been near and very present, in the shape of her goodly husband.

Dr. Lansdowne had not sensibly impressed Augusta with any particular convictions, beyond the fact of his handsome face and his confident manners. None the less could she realise that to any woman who esteemed him differently no lover need hope to bring a prouder sense of glad possession.

Surely within the very few years of married life which Shellford society allowed to Mrs. Bernard Lansdowne, such satisfaction could hardly have given place to vague yearnings, or even spoken regrets !

It was a little thing, but it sufficed to stir Augusta's girlish curiosity about Dr. Lansdowne's history.

Knowing one actor in the scenes which her imagination conjured up, she supplied the other ; gave her large expressive eyes, a form slight and fragile, tinged her cheeks with

blushes, and placed her by his side in bridal white, as she must have stood in days gone by. Dream following dream, Augusta found herself presently picturing, not now the girl's trustful look of affection, but the ardent devotion which those eyes could surely express that had so lately met her own.

How did he look? How did he speak in those past days, when *she* stood beside him in all that bridal attire?

Through all their brief life together Augusta's fancy travelled, keeping them unseen company. Until at the last she saw them when the world was all but done for 'Janet.' When her feeble fingers were losing their hold on husband and children and home. When a life so sweet was ebbing from her, faster than the waves upon the shining sands. When her failing eyes dwelt upon that goodly face as it bent over hers, over her dimmed eyes that would fain have looked for ever, and lost themselves in looking; which gazed and failed, alas!

and closed, opening to behold perhaps the face of some rapt angel, of some calm passionless abstraction.

Alas! poor soul for her doubting! Poor heart for her fainting! Love was sweet, and life was sweeter. God's angel was that goodly man to her. Before her dying eyes the visions of a farther Paradise recede, the dreams of a diviner state grow dim.

It was too much! all too much! The leaves of the music flapped idly together. Augusta pushed back her hair from her forehead with a sigh; warned by a subtle self-consciousness that it was she herself who was playing over again in imagination the part of another. She, Augusta Crotchet, not Janet Lansdowne, not the lost young wife. She, who in dreaming how the dead girl must have loved, proved by the beating of her own quick pulses how she, the living girl, could love some hero of her fancy or some treasure of the future.

The quiet afternoon wore on. Her aunts were out taking their accustomed walk ; only Miss Posy lay back sleeping in her wicker chair, confusing in her monotonous darkness the hours of day and night ; in a feeble dream following, but never overtaking, her long-lost sisters, round and round the grounds of Bellingham Park. Through the open window the sunlight fell in slanting rays upon the faded peonies of the Miss Crotchets' drawing-room carpet ; but the voices of children from the busy shore, and all other sounds of active life, fell upon Augusta's ears unheeded. The sense of life was so quick within her, well might she be prodigal of time and waste it, in the luxurious exercise of sympathy with this same 'Janet Lansdowne,' and her dead hopes and fears.

But a short time ago, so trivial a thing as the finding of an old scrap of music would not for a moment have set her dreaming in this fashion. Her romance about 'Janet Lans-

downe' was but the expression of her own changed mental condition.

The interior of the Garden House, with its grim associations of death and decay; her aunts' persistent trick of regarding solely the sharp externals of life, their ready criticism and domestic disenchantment, could not fail to produce some such reaction on the mind of an impressionable girl. Whilst they were talking she was thinking, and this was the result.

Wearied of inactivity she now caught her hat from the floor, where she had dropped it, and stepping softly from the room, so as not to awaken her drowsy Aunt Posy, she started with a light foot for the top of the highest cliff.

There, half buried in grass and flowers, she could sit and command alike the country and the sea. The level line of waters brought no saddening sense of infinity to her, for to her near acquaintance they always seemed to lead back to the home which, as a child, she had

loved so well. Behind her, along the quiet country road, one object alone appeared in sight. It was Dr. Lansdowne's carriage, driven by himself, as fast as his well-bred bays could carry it, towards the Squire's House inland.

The off horse shied, and the stones were troublesome. Mr. Rudge had waited full five minutes before Dr. Lansdowne made his appearance, and, as may be supposed, he did not like it. He did not like either his coming, or his delaying to come. Time was, not so very long ago, that Mr. Aylmer would have left the world quietly enough under Mr. Rudge's sole direction ; now, however, things were changed.

Miss Aylmer appeared to entertain an altogether unreasonable objection to becoming an orphan at the ripe age of forty-three. She had persuaded her father of late to call in Dr. Lansdowne's assistance. 'Bitten like all the rest of the silly women,' grumbled Mr. Rudge ;

for to be first in Miss Aylmer's confidence was of consequence to him.

Mr. Rudge was not quite sixty ; but he felt the weight of seventy years upon him when he followed the younger man up the stairs at the Squire's House and witnessed his reception by Adeline Aylmer, the Squire's only daughter and heiress.

Miss Aylmer was a thin, dark woman, spare in person to a distressing degree. When she walked she was accompanied by an odd sort of creaking, which suggested the friction of uncovered bones. Two rows of curls, like miniature bell-pulls, surrounded her high narrow forehead ; and an inveterate habit of fluttering her eyelids somehow fascinated whilst worrying the observer ; so that in the attempt to forget it, the sense of what she was saying was apt to be lost. This was the lady who, dressed in pink calico, now stood winking and weeping before the doctors.

The old Squire was sitting up in bed, when

she ushered the doctors into his room. Turning towards Lansdowne, he immediately began to thank him for his kindness in coming so readily to pull him through. 'You too, Rudge, you too, you know,' he added curtly; 'but it seems to me that we all want shaking up down here in the country. A doctor should shake up his ideas, sir, as he does his physic bottles. They're not old wine, to better with keeping.'

Mr. Rudge frowned, but seeing Miss Aylmer's tears, held his peace.

The old Squire was excited. He had found his tongue with his new hope of amendment, and was not to be silenced.

'We're dying off faster than we ought to do down here, Rudge, for a healthy part of the country. The death rate is increasing every year. Are you aware of that, I say?'

'So is the population, Squire.'

'Population, Rudge! What have I got to do with the population? Or you either, for the

matter of that ! You and I are getting rusty, and we must make way for the young ones.'

As Mr. Rudge was at least twenty years younger than the Squire, this was somewhat hard upon him.

'Don't you give me up, Lansdowne, and I won't give you up ; there's a bargain,' continued the aggravating old fellow.

Mr. Rudge quietly turning towards Miss Aylmer swallowed his disgust, and observed to her in an undertone that he 'attached little importance to these sudden appearances of vigour,' and that he should be 'glad to know what her father was going to take to keep him up?'

Miss Aylmer murmured 'Grouse ;' but her father caught the word, and as the doctors departed, exclaimed,

'Yes, Adeline, send a couple of brace and a hare down to that young doctor's to-night ; he has put new life into me already.'

'Very well, father ; and any for Mr. Rudge ?

‘Rudge! No! A rabbit for Rudge!’ (This, it may be supposed, was a modification of an expression too unrefined for his daughter’s ears.) ‘Rudge has digested all the game he’ll ever get from me. Whole coveys of birds and scores of ground game has that old fellow accounted for, and much good they’ve ever done me. And then the dead man’s port he has drunk! Best wine you ever get. Go and order me up a bottle now, my dear. Let them bring it and decant it here. I want to wash my throat out after all those pints of physic; and as I haven’t seen your husband yet, I shan’t save it for him.’

‘He must not have it, Miss; cold poison it would be to him coming out of that damp cellar,’ said the nurse.

‘Who is to prevent it, Mrs. Weasel?’

‘Mr. Rudge, Miss. Call him back; he is always behind the other; (in more ways than one,)’ she added.

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE SQUIRE'S HOUSE.

WHEN Mr. Rudge re-entered the room, the Squire's mood had changed. Feeling his strength again failing, Mr. Aylmer regarded that glum and displeased individual as if he were something quite new and agreeable.

‘Ah, Rudge! You back again. This is kind. Your fastest horses aren't the best stayers after all. You're the first favourite in Shellford, aren't you? I'll back you to win in the end. I always did bet upon you, you know.’

Mr. Rudge said he ‘didn't know;’ and Mr. Aylmer fell back exhausted upon his pillow; turning uneasily, he murmured—

‘I wish I’d such a son. He’d be a great comfort to me now.’

This was a change of conversation delightful to Mr. Rudge. His anger vanished in an instant. His flabby features stiffened into eager lines of attention.

Mr. Rudge had long determined that he would be the man who should marry Miss Aylmer as soon as she was mistress of herself and her fortunes ; but never, even in his most prosperous moments, had he contemplated making her father a sharer in his schemes.

Mr. Aylmer’s progenitors had been solid landowners of the yeoman class. They had lived for many years in the county ; and although, as a younger son, the present gentleman only owed his title of ‘squire’ to the house he rented, yet Mr. Rudge well knew his estimate of his own and his daughter’s importance ; as also his relative estimate of the inferior consequence of Rudge, surgeon and general practitioner.

The 'squire's' manners were a trifle rough for most of his county neighbours, and his daughter's exaggerated refinements often brought down upon her the criticism of being—'not quite a lady;' but the tradition of landed property, and the reputation of a choice cellar served to facilitate matters, and, as a matter of fact, all the people called upon Mr. Aylmer's daughter who would not have called upon Mr. Rudge's wife.

'I wish I had such a son-in-law. My daughter wants a sensible man to look after her. Or if she does not, her money does. If she doesn't get a husband while I'm alive, she'll buy one when I'm dead, and she finds she can afford it. That's the way with women.'

Mr. Rudge could not afford to be squeamish. So good an opportunity might never occur again. Here was the Squire actually asking for a son-in-law. In his dotage no doubt; but Mr. Rudge was quite prepared to take advantage of his unexpected weakness. Such a

marriage would, he had long seen, be the making of him. It would remove him far above the accidents of a merely professional income.

Nothing could have looked less favourable for his suit than the old man's demeanour towards him had done half-an-hour ago ; but, marrying happy-thought to happy-go-lucky action, the doctor now stretched out his legs in their baggy coverings, inserted a thumb in each armhole, assumed the voice in which he made the responses in church, and began.

‘What you have observed, Squire, is true. Very true. Miss Aylmer does need a protector. I have long felt it ; but it exceeds all my hopes that you should mention the subject to me yourself. I am, as you are aware, sir, a widower. My wife had ten years of ill-health, poor thing. I believe I made her a good husband. Anyone would tell you that ; but it was a great trial, sir, to a man in the prime of life ; and the long and the short of it is that I

am thinking of marrying again, if the lady will have me.'

This last was an afterthought ; for, indeed, he had persuaded himself, not without some excuse, that the lady would be ready enough to have him. The Squire's attention was not yet arrested. He moaned feebly, and looked annoyed.

'I have a great, a very great, regard for your daughter, sir. Your mentioning your wishes to me so very kindly just now has, I may say, decided me on mentioning mine to you.'

The Squire started. Opening his hitherto closed eyes, he fixed them full on Mr. Rudge's face.

'I am,' continued Mr. Rudge, unmoved, 'one of the oldest inhabitants of the place. There are no stories to be told about me, or about my father, the late Dr. Rudge. I am not a man to push myself where there are others before me, as some do who come from London or—they best know where. In respect

of fortune, indeed, I am aware Miss Aylmer has the advantage of me; but, such as it is, I am not ashamed to offer my banker's book as a reference to any man.'

The Squire's puzzled look showed him to be still following his own independent train of thought.

'Why, what stories do they tell about Lansdowne? He seems a gentlemanly sort of man, and somebody said he came of a good county family. Who was it? Oh! the Miss Crotchets.'

'Dr. Lansdowne!' exclaimed the unfortunate Rudge, confronted at all points with his rival. 'Dr. Lansdowne is such a very young man: and I do not see, sir, what he has to do with the subject of our present conversation. You were good enough to explain to me your anxieties respecting your daughter, and I was assuring you that I shared them, and that if you would trust her to me, her health and happiness should be my first consideration.'

‘Stick to her health, man! Stick to her health, and let her happiness alone!’ exclaimed the Squire, raising himself in bed. He was fully aroused now. ‘It’s an impertinence, I say. Because I told you I wanted a son-in-law, I didn’t tell you to prescribe one, did I? And I don’t relish your prescription, let me tell you, if it’s yourself you’re offering. It doesn’t meet my views at all, and it wouldn’t meet my daughter’s views. Do you think my daughter would have a man that has felt her pulse these twenty years? If that’s what you’re reckoning on when I’m dead, let me tell you this: women like something that they know less about—something that puzzles them, if they can get it. You mean to marry again, do you? Go and get a wife then, man; they aren’t rare. But pray don’t keep anybody waiting on our account. My daughter can afford to choose for herself.’

‘She may choose me, Mr. Aylmer.’

‘And if she does choose to make a fool of

herself I shan't be here to see it,' gasped the Squire, overcome by exhaustion. More he evidently longed to add; but his brief flash of energy forsook him.

'Not be here to see it! That you won't,' said Mr. Rudge to himself as he left the room. The Squire responded to his critical professional glance by gasping—

'I shall say nothing about it; nothing about it to her. I shall not help you with her. I shall not countenance it.'

'So much the better,' thought Rudge, 'if you will not help you cannot hinder.' He was discomposed, but by no manner of means dissuaded, by the reception which his offer had met with.

Miss Aylmer herself met him at the foot of the stairs, with anxious inquiries.

'Your father is wonderfully better, wonderfully better. Avoid all exciting conversation; and let me advise you to go yourself to the Vicarage party on Tuesday. You need change and fresh air.'

He spoke in his most affectionate tones, and taking her lean hand in his flabby one, he pressed it in a most moving way. He now intended upon that very Tuesday to urge his paternally amorous suit. Nothing further could be gained by waiting, and he feared lest her father's death might intervene to postpone the interesting communication, and, by rendering her mistress of her fortune, enhance her value in her own eyes and in those of others. He now reflected that it would be as well for him to be beforehand with this contingency, although the idea had not hitherto struck him. Someone else might appear, feeling in himself qualities capable of being developed by the possession of capital.

‘But she is plain,’ he thought to himself, with the ready depreciation of prospective ownership. ‘And I do wish I could have cured her of that feeble habit of winking. I should have liked a younger woman this time. I wonder what that West Indian is, that

Crotchet girl. If she is anything of an heiress we shall have that fellow Lansdowne after her. Unless, indeed, those stories of Timlings have got anything in them. That's a point I mean to investigate.'

In this estimate of Dr. Lansdowne's probable motives Mr. Rudge judged him wrongly ; but then he judged him by himself. How else is a man to perform an operation so rash and uncertain ?

Mr. Rudge was homely and well meaning ; if not a very elevated soul. Coarse, if souls may have a texture ; of a moral fibre tough rather than plastic. He meant very well indeed by himself ; but he meant not at all badly by Miss Aylmer either.

He was no brute ; only a trifle less of a man than he might have been. He was accustomed, moreover, habitually to show his worst side to himself, as a relief from the professional necessity of always keeping the best side of himself before others. In telling the Squire that

he had 'been a good husband to his first wife,' he told him no more than the truth so far as the major actions of life were concerned. He did not maltreat or abuse her for her physical incapacities; he did not forsake her. He only neglected her as much as under the circumstances she had a reasonable right to expect to be neglected, with a trifle over now and then, perhaps, just to counteract any selfish tendency on her part towards regarding herself as the chief sufferer in their joint affliction. More than that Mr. Rudge as a rule never laid upon her; and if, in spite of all, the poor lady longed and vehemently prayed for death, that she might set him free, Mr. Rudge saw nothing pathetic in that! Quite the reverse. It was a very natural and proper sort of feeling. Within bounds; within bounds unexpressed by action, of course. Especially for a woman. For to women, as Mr. Rudge gratefully recognised, the attractions of another world are mercifully greater than they are to

men. To himself, indeed, churchwarden though he was, Heaven usually presented itself in the light of a refuge for the destitute ; a sort of superior Union, Providentially provided, suitable for sick women and the moribund of either sex. He might come to it himself one day, but he was not there yet.

Meanwhile, he easily reconciled himself to his wife's removal thither. It might in the end be the best arrangement for all parties.

To her it was 'all being made up now.' This thought reassured him on certain anniversaries, when her pale image was apt to reappear somewhat reproachfully before him. And as regarded himself—in the unfortunate uncertainty of future domestic arrangements and rewards—it behoved him to make it all straight in this world, by marrying again, with an heiress.

When Mr. Rudge thought of justice thus undeniably accomplishing her ends, even in the present state of things, for those that had

only the eyes to perceive her operations, he sighed the sigh of the wise. It was wonderful what a simple thing the world became when looked at as Mr. Rudge, in his sanguine moments, viewed it. Starting from the undeniable basis of his own personal experience, all argument tended towards its least complicated development; all inferences became immediate, and all conclusions final.

Things in general did not, however, wear quite such a simple and equitable look to his rival on this particular morning.

When, leaving Mr. Rudge behind him at the Squire's House, Dr. Lansdowne turned his horses' heads again towards the village, his face was clouded. In noticing Mr. Rudge's affectionate bearing towards Miss Aylmer, it had occurred to him for the first time to remember that Mr. Rudge was a widower.

Then, with a comparison half amused and half contemptuous, he had contrasted as possible wooers Mr. Rudge and himself. Then

as wooed, Adeline Aylmer and Augusta Crotchet, whose bright face he had seen not an hour before, as she sat among the wild flowers at the top of the cliff.

But why Augusta Crotchet; when she was nothing to him, and was never likely to be anything? Never likely! When youth and life seemed all to abound for him! When the things of which he never spoke and never heard now, were becoming almost as if they had never been! 'Never likely!' Who said that? He started and turned uneasily in his seat, as though someone behind him had spoken.

Then he whipped up his horses till he nearly upset an old goody coming with a barrowload of turnips down the chalky lane, from a ploughed field at the top.

Neither exercise nor fresh air could rid him of these bitter memories, which, once awakened, clung like stinging insects. They were cowards, those enemies, attacking only the man sensitive

enough to suffer ; leaving in peace the other, whose coarser nature was not susceptible to their attacks. Perhaps if every one had his deserts in this world, as Mr. Rudge when he grasped what he considered to be his own was disposed to say that they did, he might have been surprised to find himself and Dr. Lansdowne changing consciences. He might have acquired for himself a tormenting accuser and his rival an approving friend.

Avoiding the High Street of the little town, where the quiet autumn visitors might still be met, Dr. Lansdowne turned rapidly in at the end of the Terrace, and came upon the two sisters, Rosy and Posy, stumbling along together. Posy had just been dragged full against the lamp-post in front of Dr. Lansdowne's house, by her faithful dog 'Gin.'

He must have been unnerved that day, for without a word of greeting or inquiry, he turned into his own house and shut the door, fairly shuddering as he did so.

‘I loathe the sight of those old twins,’ he muttered.

‘Brute!’ said Miss Rosy with decision, alluding to the doctor’s manners.

‘Poor fellow! He only does as he’d be done by,’ said Miss Posy, supposing her to allude to the dog’s conduct, and feebly pulling herself together.

‘As he’d be done by, Posy! Does he like doors banged within an inch of his nose?’

‘No. I meant lamp-posts. That *is* where “Gin” likes them.’

‘If he was the wind he couldn’t bang a door worse,’ grumbled Rosy.

‘It seems to me that he is something like the wind, if you’re talking of Dr. Lansdowne, Auntie; at least, no one in Shellford seems to know where he comes from,’ said Augusta, who had just joined the twins with her Aunt Lilly.

‘What’s that to you?’ asked the latter, sharply.

‘The wind is a good deal; I am fond of it,’

answered her niece. 'I've been sitting up on the cliff half the afternoon to feel it blowing through my hair. Of Dr. Lansdowne I know nothing. It was Rebecca who told me that.'

'Rebecca knows more than the man in the street,' snapped Miss Lilly. 'Tea's ready. Come in.'

CHAPTER X.

IN JOHN CROTCHET'S MIND.

IN one of the lower windows of the Garden House John Crotchet's fair head and inexpressive features might now commonly be seen. He had found some remnants of his grandfather Hobbes' library in a cupboard behind the green bed, and he was continually poring over these dusty volumes. He arranged them in rows over the dining-room sideboard, and took more interest in them than in anything he had yet met with in England. 'Full shelves make empty heads,' was Miss Lilly's remark when she saw them again ; but in her father's days Miss Lilly's tongue had been stiller.

Mr. Hobbes Crotchet's method of making his books his own had been by pasting inside

them the family crest, a bear climbing a pole, with their characteristic motto, '*Je m'accroche aux Crochets.*'

His grandson however gave him credit for having selected these works with a care for their interior, which, as a matter of fact, he had only displayed in the choice of samples for the crops on the home farm at Bellingham.

A man's actions get so strangely assorted after his death, that the most trivial have a trick of outliving the most important. As a consequence, Hobbes Crotchet, merchant and gentleman farmer, was venerated by his grandson as a student and lover of books.

John Crotchet thought much about his grandfather Hobbes in these days. He knew that he had voluntarily relinquished the money-making business in Jamaica many years earlier in life than his own father had done; and in this simple fact he found a suggestion of affinity between himself and his ancestor. If the business had been left in his hands, he,

John, would have quitted it, leaving it to ruin him if it must, as he presumed that his grandfather had done.

In that imaginative shrine, wherein any other young man would have enthroned his dead mother or his possible bride, would have dreamt of their sympathy and felt himself consoled by their affection, this strange youth was installing his choleric old grandfather Hobbes, was seeking to individualise him and to place him before him as an intelligent embodiment, to which he might mutely appeal for the comprehension which he found it impossible to obtain from any living soul.

Poor John; his nature would have been well worth studying; but there was no man to study it, or woman either. His father and his sister took him for granted. He objected to the coffee-growing business in Jamaica, therefore he had better enter at an English university and go into the English Church. So far as the university was concerned, the young man

himself heartily acquiesced. Yet so ignorant was he, that to his uninstructed imagination Cambridge presented itself in the light of an overgrown boys' school, where, at one-and-twenty years of age he humbly hoped he might escape a flogging. Unlike lads reared in English schools, he had had no friends to correct his ideas of university life. As regarded the second part of his father's programme, namely that of taking orders, he had not as yet found the expression of his objections possible; chiefly because those objections did not present themselves in any form definite enough to admit of manifestation.

When John and Augusta were children it used to be said of them that, Augusta 'knew what she wanted, cried for it, got it, and was happy;' but that John only knew 'what he did not want, never cried, and never was happy.' And as he grew up, the connection between the abstract world in which he passed his silent hours, and the outer world of things

around him, was still far from clear to him. Neither was language that perfectly simple and obvious method of communication to him which it was to his fellow creatures. His tongue had not learnt to be the exponent of his ideas, any more than his face had learnt to be the index of his feelings.

Perpetual discouragement, and a slowly growing sense of failure, is the heritage of minds of this order, remedied in secret by the minute conscientiousness which leads to a continual recommencement of effort. The great rope of human endeavour is unceasingly turning around them; but the velocity baffles them, and at each attempt to bear a hand they fall back discouraged and bewildered.

Hour after hour, as he sat over his books, it was less their contents which were filling John Crotchet's mind, than the question of how to obtain from them some solution of the problems which were meeting him in his own private experience. Because to his father and

sister, and to that small portion of the thinking community by which he now found himself surrounded, John Crotchet's life presented itself as one perfectly simple and obvious ; calling for small comment, and demanding less consideration ; it did not follow that he saw it himself in the same satisfactory light. On the contrary, whether as a matter of present detail, or as a future possible whole, he was equally far from seeing his way through it.

In this state of things he was now slowly determining that, if for once his tongue would prove the obedient servant of his will, he would put some questions to the Rev. Humphrey Mortimer, on the forthcoming Tuesday. He might at least be able to tell him whether there was not some preliminary process, by which he might adjust his mental machinery to the requirements of the university ; some course of reading, outside his grandfather's library, by which he might stimulate his appetite for the reception of academic food.

John Crotchet was not the only person who was awaiting with anxiety the approach of this much-talked-of day. Others besides himself were postponing the solution of their difficulties to it. Opportunities for meeting out of church were rare in Shellford.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Mortimer's economic soul was stirred by the fear lest the fatal termination of Mr. Aylmer's illness should precede the day of her feast. Her cakes were already browning in the oven; but the Squire was the most influential magistrate upon the bench, as well as the most important person in the congregation; and Mrs. Mortimer felt that to entertain the parish if he were dead, would be to aim a blow at the connection of Church and State in Shellford. To such widely extended significance may women's actions attain; and those of parsons' wives in particular!

'Elizabeth,' said Mr. Crotchet solemnly on Tuesday morning at breakfast, 'what coffee is this?' Miss Lilly took no notice. She

had begun to resent the formality of the address.

‘Our brother is speaking to you, Lilly. Don’t you hear? Are you deaf?’

Fussy put the question. She had heard herself, and she was delighted at the opportunity of returning the reproach of deafness.

‘Bolton is not calling me,’ said Miss Lilly angrily, ‘it’s the cook he wants. Her name is Elizabeth. No one ever is called by their full name out of service. It’s vulgar.’

‘Then do you think “Gusty” would be less vulgar than Augusta, Aunt?’

‘Perhaps it would have been better if we had all kept to our names more,’ said Posy meekly. ‘A name is really nothing when it’s picked to pieces.’

‘No, and *you’re* nothing if one comes to picking you to pieces; nobody is,’ retorted Lilly. ‘And let me tell you, Posy, there’d be few things easier to do. Such a shifty, follow-my-leader sort of body as you are. There’s no

more dependence to be placed upon you than there is upon that weathercock at the top of the flagstaff. And all Shellford knows you can't go by that. It is always shifting backwards and forwards and round about.'

So saying, Miss Lilly seated herself firmly in her chair, as a protest against all vacillation, physical and moral. The supporting pole of the maligned vane looked less rigid than she; whilst poor Miss Posy fidgetted and turned about nervously, as though to justify her sister's comparison.

'Fussy,' said Bolton, again trying for an answer, 'I ask you now, since Elizabeth won't hear me, what's this coffee?'

'Winny's, brother. What you sent after Winny died.'

''Tisn't,' snapped Lilly. 'It's Nanny's. The last pound but one of Nanny's. Where should we be, I should like to know, now you've come home, if we had got into Winny's yet. Winny left little enough of anything behind her.'

‘Let the poor thing alone, Elizabeth, can’t you!’ said Mr. Crotchet in a tone of disgust. ‘Haven’t you enough with finding fault with each other while you’re alive, that you must needs be reflecting upon those that are dead, poor souls! What I meant was, I shouldn’t have taken this for West Indian at all. Your namesake the cook cannot make it. And have you nothing else in the way of a relish? Nothing so biting as your own words, eh?’

Bolton’s temper was commonly a good one, but it broke down under a prolonged course of Miss Lilly’s housekeeping.

‘Don’t be so put about, brother! The Squire’s nearly dead,’ said Posy in a conciliatory tone. ‘Then you can go into a house of your own, and have things your own way.’

‘It will be a great trial to poor Mrs. Mortimer if he dies this morning, with all the people going there at three o’clock,’ observed Rosy.

‘He won’t die then,’ said Lilly. ‘Rebecca has heard this morning he’s better.’

‘How many of you are going?’ asked Bolton in an unflattering tone of Miss Lilly.

‘Not Fussy or Posy. The rest of us are all expected.’

‘No, I don’t care to go fumbling round,’ acquiesced Posy. ‘I shall stop at home and have a muffin to my tea.’

‘And I’ll stop with you and have a crumpet, Aunt, if you like,’ said Augusta.

‘I mean to go, Lilly. Do you hear? I fully mean to go,’ said Fussy. ‘John will go with me; he doesn’t want to talk, and I don’t want to hear. So we can just walk round together. Can’t we, John?’

Thus addressed, John looked up, swallowed the tail of a fish, and replied—

‘I propose to speak this afternoon to Mr. Mortimer if possible.’

‘John is growing brilliant,’ Bolton said, amused at his son’s deliberate manner.

‘Fish make brains,’ remarked Lilly.

‘And John has had three red mullets and a tail,’ added his sister.

‘He can’t mind you, Fussy. He wants his senses for his own use. Do you hear? You had better stop at home. You won’t catch a word of the address,’ shouted Lilly.

‘So much the better. I can’t think why folks make such a fuss about hearing the clergy on Sundays or week days. One day is as good as another not to hear. It’s less wearing to be a trifle deaf.

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE VESTRY.

As has already been mentioned, a young man of the name of 'Timlings,' who was Mr. Rudge's assistant, had been placed in charge of of the 'Provident Dispensary.'

Into this unremunerative position he had easily been pushed by Mr. Rudge's uncontested influence; he having previously served, in that gentleman's surgery, a not too severe apprenticeship to the 'noble art of healing,'—as Mr. Rudge was accustomed to call his own practice. When speaking of his rival's, he used other and less re-assuring terms.

Now Mr. Timlings had for some time viewed, with growing feelings of anxiety and

dislike, Dr. Lansdowne's gratuitous visits to Hephzibah Clackett, Betsy Sudds, and sundry other interesting cases amongst the poor. No doubt Mr. Timlings had been in the habit of professing a more intimate knowledge of these cases than fuller inquiry might have assigned to him; but because a man does not do a thing himself, that is no reason why he should wish it done for him.

A man's duty is pretty much what he makes it; and Mr. Timlings was far from admitting that he had failed in his. Medical practice is of course, as we all know, quite one thing amongst the poor, and another thing amongst the rich.

Whilst a nice set of shopkeepers' wives, and a fair sprinkling of gentlemen's servants, were willing to avail themselves of Mr. Timlings' inexpensive services, it was only natural that his dispensary practice should sink to the level of a stepping-stone for his ambition.

When however he learnt, that 'that prig Lansdowne' was 'playing ducks and drakes

with the constitutions of the lower orders,' for whose reducing and rebuilding the parish certainly held Mr. Rudge and himself accountable, he intimated to his superior, that he did 'not intend to stand it.'

He should, he declared, 'send in his resignation at the next meeting of the Board;' and should henceforth continue his 'paying practice only.'

Mr. Timlings' decision was largely the result of a lurking sense of ignorance and incompetence. He had never had any medical education worth speaking of. He was an unqualified practitioner. He had, as Mr. Rudge's representative, undertaken duties which he was incapable of performing, and had gone at them perfunctorily and even carelessly. In his secret soul he knew all this. He felt too that Dr. Lansdowne knew it, and was acting accordingly.

When he heard a group of women round the Dispensary door declaring that 'one bottle of Dr. Lansdowne's stuff' was 'worth a dozen'

of the parish mixture, he was unable at once to assign the assertion to the ready transfer of prejudice common to the vulgar.

If the voice of the people was not in this instance the voice of God, it was at least the voice of Mr. Timlings' conscience.

Mr. Rudge listened to his complaint, in an attitude apparently judicial, but in reality sympathetic. Only a sense of what was due to himself, prevented Mr. Rudge, in this instance, from making common cause with his inferior. He too had his secret motives differing from those of Mr. Timlings. He had always anticipated, for himself, an unchecked upward career; terminating only in retirement, when fulness of person and purse should render it easy and dignified. He had hitherto been able to afford Mr. Timlings his unimportant little practice, confined as it chiefly was to the humbler members of families into which he had himself introduced him. Now, however, finding himself arrested in his upward course

by this aggravating young physician from London, Mr. Rudge was in his turn disposed to check his subordinate in his aspirations. Mr. Timlings must not be permitted to relinquish the Dispensary in favour of private practice.

Between a fixed and unyielding body above him and an inflated and ascending body below him, Mr. Rudge was in danger of having the breath squeezed out of his lungs ; or, to speak more correctly, the bread forced out of his mouth.

Something of all this, in language half professional and half pious, he managed to convey to the attentive ears of his old friend and pastor, Mr. Mortimer, in the vestry after church. Mr. Rudge was churchwarden. He knew the value of office ; no man better.

The Vicar heard him with patience. He was chairman of the Dispensary Board ; and as such he took pains to elicit Mr. Rudge's views of the matter. The Timlings *versus* Lansdowne question had already reached his ears.

‘Dr. Lansdowne’s treatment of Mr. Timlings amounted,’ so Mr. Rudge assured him, ‘to downright persecution ; in which he was actuated, so report said, by some purely personal motive. Mr. Timlings’ resignation must not,’ Mr. Rudge urged, ‘be accepted.’ He must even be induced to continue his services, by the voluntary augmentation of his salary, if necessary. Mr. Timlings had, in Mr. Rudge’s opinion, ‘all the making of a good sound country practitioner. He was moral and correct in his conduct too, which was more than could be said of most London men. Timlings once got rid of, Mr. Rudge had it on good authority that Lansdowne was preparing to foist on them, in his place, a young student — Dodds was the name — from one of the London Hospitals. This would be in itself a most calamitous thing. Was Mr. Mortimer aware of the actual state of affairs in some of those great London Hospitals? Things’ Mr. Rudge had ‘heard about them

in the length of his experience, unfit, quite unfit for publication.'

Mr. Mortimer looked alarmed, and his friend continued—'When I hear so much about their fine buildings, and their airy windows and their ventilation, I think if they would ventilate their morals somewhat more and their windows less, it would be better for the people that are in them. They lay out their money, sir, simply to catch the public by the eye. It's astonishing the discrepancy between what the public observes and what we impartial members of the profession know. Those great scrubbed up London Hospitals, are simply "whited sepulchres," and dead men's bones are not the only uncleanness they contain !

'Serious charges,' said Mr. Mortimer uneasily, with a vague reminiscence of magisterial duties.

'I could name one, sir, at this moment. A lunatic asylum it happens to be. Why, that

place owns large estates in the country, down towards Wales. Crofts was the house doctor, and he has gone to reside now on the country estate. "Prentwood Manor" they call the place. I give you this as an instance of the abuse of funds. They preserve their game largely, sir. They employ four or five keepers, besides lots of others as woodmen and labourers. They pay the expenses of all the Governors who go down for the shooting in the season. They send up hampers of game for the patients. Now, sir, that's a fact. Game to feed the lunatics, and the Governors and the keepers! It's enough to make one's blood boil!'

'Or one's mouth water. Eh, Rudge?'

But Mr. Rudge would not descend from his moral platform.

'Then, too, sir, consider the nature of the instruction they give to these young men that they're so fond of turning out, to meddle where they can't make. A lot of "ifs," and "whys," and "wherefores." "Such a one says this,'

and “So-and-so maintains the other,” until it’s a wonder if they know their patients’ heads from their heels! It isn’t sense and isn’t reason! As in your profession, sir, you are always teaching us that there’s one good, sound rule of doctrine; so in mine, I do maintain, that there is, and should be, one good, sound rule of practice. Medical students should be instructed what they are to do, and how and when they are to do it. On each occasion their duty is to remember what they were taught was the proper line of treatment for that class of disease. But, my patience, sir!’ (Mr. Rudge always pronounced this, his favourite expletive, as though he were alluding to his sick people.) ‘My patience, sir! If there’s to be not one course of treatment, but twenty. If they’ve got to reason from a dozen note-books to one case; from one case to half-a-dozen others. If they are to imagine, and to invent, and to make comparisons; to reason, to discriminate, to postulate hypothetical cases,

and to perform fifty other confounded mental operations ' (Mr. Rudge forgot the sacred nature of the walls which surrounded him here, and Mr. Mortimer glanced at them slightly to remind him of the fact), ' their patients will die whilst they're doing it, and their own mothers will make better doctors than they will.'

' It's the fault of the age, my friend. It forsakes the king's highway for sheep tracks.'

' And then can't distinguish between the crookedness of half a hundred of them, and so misses its chances,' interrupted Rudge. ' Young men who saw so much as these do, in my young days, would have been set down for star-struck or moon-blind. Timlings, now, is quite another sort. He has no theories of his own or other people's to work out. No experiments to try upon you ; and there's a great deal in that, sir, allow me to remark.'

Mr. Mortimer hung up his surplice and locked the vestry door. He had decided that he must use his personal influence to further

his friend's wishes. The subject was one which might with advantage be mentioned when the people were assembled before him on his own lawn. He was accustomed on these occasions to conclude his address by introducing any subject of present importance to the parish; and the management of the Dispensary was a case clearly in point. He did not at present quite see how the matter had best be arranged, but he was accustomed to act upon what may be called the extempore plan. Some idea would be sure to come to him with the moment for action, and he should happily and fortuitously combine the two.

Moral suasion was his forte. This mode of influence is, however, effective chiefly with individuals. When more widely used it is apt to fail as a lever for want of a definite fulcrum.

He trusted much to the presence and assistance of Mr. Rudge on the following Tuesday; much, also, to the absence of Mr. Timlings, who, since he could better be praised

behind his back, was to be invited not to appear.

One little fact was, however, left out in the Vicar's calculations which his wife might well have supplied. That was the unexpected invitation which she had extended to Dr. Lansdowne.

Partly owing to the pressure of domestic affairs, but more to secret doubts of his approval, she had not thought it necessary to inform her husband of the course she had taken. Neither did he think it needful to mention to her the state of affairs as regarded Mr. Timlings. Thus, as the hour approached, these diversities of thought and intention prepared a network of confusion for the Mortimers and their guests.

CHAPTER XII.

ON TUESDAY.

THE Miss Crotchets felt upon special occasions, such as the present, that they owed Shellford-by-Shore a lesson in manners. Punctually, therefore, as the church clock struck the hour of invitation they appeared upon the lawn at the vicarage. They and their whole party, Bolton excepted. Miss Lilly wore an old black satin, short and very narrow. It had been by Nanny bequeathed to her survivors when she slipped the garments of the flesh. A black scarf, spiky straw bonnet of the fashion of earlier days, hung with a crape valence, and jet sealing-wax bracelets completed her cheerful get-up. Her bony fingers were further

adorned with mourning rings, worn for her father, her mother, and her three sisters, Sissy, Polly, and Nanny; but for Winny she wore none, as five and tenpence would not buy one.

Miss Fussy and Miss Rosy appeared in mitigated varieties of the same costume. Their nephew was remarkable chiefly by the imperturbability with which he carried his aunts' three umbrellas and his own beneath one arm, whilst their three shawls hung from the other.

Augusta following them, was almost painfully conscious of their grotesque appearance. She was unsupported by her father, who had promised to look in later on. He felt himself too great a man to be before his time.

They found Mrs. Mortimer standing before ten long rows of chairs placed upon the gravel walk facing the house. Kitchen, attic, and bedroom had evidently contributed these shabby wooden and rush-bottomed seats. They were not planted in and out, as if by pleasant twos and threes their occupants might assemble to

flirt and gossip. Each chair stood rooted as if upon a principle, or, at least, upon a prejudice. The windows of the house opened out upon this gravel walk. The lawn and flower-beds lay below. There, fronting the chairs, stood four deal tables, prophesying in plain unvarnished language of weak tea and seedy cake.

The hostess herself seemed little disposed to make use of pleasing disguises in the reception of her guests. No smiling and disengaged air adorned her countenance. She showed the wrong side of everything before the right, let you into the secret of how it all was done, and behaved like an overworked housekeeper in her Sunday clothes.

When the Miss Crotchets' party arrived she had not finished making the bags for the tea, and the muslin had run short. She had not seen the children's sashes properly tied. She had not looked out one of her husband's new collars, and she knew that the old ones would fall down at the end of half an hour's friction.

She was flurried and untidy, and she longed to rush off and leave the Miss Crotchets to fate.

‘Oh, dear me! Yes. Here you all are. How d’ye do?’

‘Yes. Here we are,’ said Lilly triumphantly. ‘So tiresome is it not for you when people are late? How rude these Shellford people are! There’s no one here! It isn’t manners.’

‘Oh! we can give them five minutes law as it isn’t Sunday,’ said the Rev. Humphrey Mortimer, coming up smiling blandly above one of his weakest collars. ‘Take a seat, take a seat, Miss Crotchet. They’re all free.’ And he laughed merrily at his clerical joke.

Miss Lilly selected the first row, and her sisters followed her example.

‘Come in and put down your umbrellas and cloaks, Mr. John Crotchet,’ said the hostess, with unusual diplomacy. ‘This way. Follow me.’

John carefully rid himself of his aunts’ encumbrances, but he hesitated before parting

with his own. John was a young man who, as his Aunt Lilly phrased it, 'felt his hands,' and he knew that without his umbrella this annoyance would beset him. He looked round doubtfully. His guide was gone. 'One moment,' she had murmured as she vanished through a green baize door.

John took a survey of the premises, meaning to return as he had come; but in that survey he found himself to be standing upon the threshold of a dark room, all full of literary lumber. The temptation was irresistible. Grasping his umbrella firmly he entered. Seizing a book he sank at once into the easiest chair, and lost there at once and completely his awkward hands, his large umbrella, his aunts and himself.

Meanwhile his sister, not wishing to add to the formality of the scene, had declined the fourth seat in a row with her aunts, and had wandered off to where a group of children attracted her by their voices.

Ellen Mortimer and her friends had all the awkwardness upon them which strict cleanliness and starched white frocks could impart. Humphrey, the eldest boy, was clad in a badly-cut-up suit of homespun, which had already been up Snowdon on his father's back. But with these respectable children were two dainty creatures, bearing as little resemblance to them as a couple of humming-birds to Aylesbury ducks.

They were Violet and Algernon Lansdowne.

‘Ah! poor mites, too fine for comfort or for taste,’ said Mrs. Mortimer, as she passed; ‘it’s a nurse’s way. Their mother would have known better.’

Augusta met the round eyes full of baby wonder, observed the richness of the lace and velvet, down to the silk socks and blue shoes, and found herself romancing again about their dead mother, about the ‘Janet’ of the song.

The boy was much of a size with

Humphrey Mortimer; the girl a couple of years younger. The children seemed disposed to fraternise, but not having learnt to begin with the weather, the opening remark was abrupt.

Humphrey put it to his fellow boy :

‘Have you ever had a tooth taken out by a man. I have. A man, mind, and a thing as big as what they cut the sugar with; not a nurse and a bit of thread.’

‘Oh! Humbug! Not near so big,’ said Ellen in a grieved tone. ‘Humbug’ was the family name for this young gentleman, whose imagination continually led him into difficulties.

‘My papa’s got bigger things than that. Saws big enough to cut your head off, if you tell lies,’ said Algernon.

‘Our cook has got bigger. She lets me cut with them. I cut a mouse’s head off once,’ said Humphrey.

‘Did you cut his head off and make him dead yourself? I should like that. And did

you see his soul? When I go to the shops where all the dead sheep are, and the drowned fishes, I always look all about to find their souls ; but I can't see them because they're gone,' continued Algernon.

The subject evidently stirred him deeply. His big eyes grew larger with excitement.

'It was only a 'maginary mouse,' said Humphrey, with a reluctant concession to popular prejudice in favour of facts.

'Creatures have not got souls,' said Ellen dogmatically.

'I've seen a sheep's heart then, Miss Ellen.'

Humphrey offered this as a general contribution to the subject, which might be appropriate ; but Ellen did not receive it kindly.

'You story, Humbug!' was her answer.

Poor Humbug began to feel that the distinction between truth and falsehood was not so clear as grown-up people told him.

'You're not to call me "Humbug," Ellen. Mamma said you weren't.'

‘Papa does.’

‘Papa’s a man; men may do as they like always, and boys most times. Women can hardly ever, because they’ve got to set an example, like mamma; and girls never. And you’re a girl.’

‘I isn’t,’ lisped Violet.

‘You is,’ said her brother fiercely. ‘You can’t crack a whip. You throw stones all the wrong way; you can’t whistle, Miss Vi; so you are a girl.’

‘Come on,’ urged Humphrey, ‘come and see my horse. He’s as tall as a real live pony. You may sit behind me, and take fast hold of his tail. You’ll have to hold on, I can tell you.’

‘Can’t you whistle, little one?’ said Augusta to the girl, as the brother went off to ride face to crupper on the hobbyhorse.

The perplexed look in the baby face was pretty, as the child pursed up her lips in the vain endeavour to emit sounds loud enough to convince herself that she was after all a boy.

‘Never mind. Brother was wrong. Some girls can whistle. Let us come and play at hiding over there in that arbour, and I’ll whistle for you.’

Ellen struggled between politeness and propriety ; but followed Augusta and sat staring whilst, with Violet on her knees, she whistled musical notes, softly, below her breath. Then, suddenly changing, she began to imitate the notes of different birds, and ended by telling the children stories of her home in Jamaica. She was in the middle of a mocking-bird’s song for his supper, when an uninvited listener cut short the performance.

He was claimed by Violet as ‘Papa,’ and he held out his arms to her, but she refused to stir, and Ellen made way for him upon the bench.

‘I know all about it. I’ve been listening ever so long, Violet,’ he said smiling.

‘Oh!’ gasped Ellen ; ‘he hasn’t. He has only just got here.’

‘It’s ‘maginary knowledge,’ said Augusta, quoting Master Humbug.

‘And that, I fear, is all the knowledge Miss Crotchet and I have of each other at present. Violet is more fortunate than her father. Vi, tell papa all about this kind lady.’ The child only nestled closer.

To cover an awkward pause, Augusta remarked,

‘Imaginary knowledge is the most satisfactory sometimes.’

He started, looked at her quickly as though to surprise some latent meaning in the words, but was reassured by her open countenance. ‘Since I have been in Shellford,’ she said, ‘I have heard a good many people discussed, but I never pay much attention to what is said by my aunts about people. Their criticisms are not often flattering.’

‘Your aunts have not a very favourable opinion of me.’

‘Frankly, no. I believe they prefer Mr.

Rudge. He speaks with approval of rights-of-way.'

'I hope you will not believe them, Miss Crotchet, if they find much to say against me.'

'Why should I?'

'When you've been here longer it may be different. I wish you would do me a great favour. Promise me the opportunity of explaining myself, before you attach any importance to any of the things you may hear said.'

'How unnecessarily anxious he is!' she thought; and Ellen Mortimer, who had been devouring their words with the curiosity of a well brought up child, remarked suddenly,

'If you did not do anything, it does not matter if people tell of you.'

This ended the conversation. Lansdowne coloured with evident annoyance, and Augusta proposed to go in search of her father, who should by now have arrived.

As they went they came upon Miss Aylmer. She was seated upon a bench on the

lawn, sipping tepid tea. Her dress was of puce and green, and she looked like a single petunia. Dr. Lansdowne paused :

‘Miss Aylmer, allow me to introduce Miss Augusta Crotchet. She has been kind enough to superintend the juvenile department, and I have been to relieve her of my little girl.’

Miss Aylmer’s curls shook, and her eyelids quivered as she bowed. Then she murmured above Violet’s sunny head,

‘Not much like you, Dr. Lansdowne. It is an advantage to a girl to be like her father. I was always reckoned very like dear Papa. Family feeling so depends on trifles. Don’t you agree with me, Miss Crotchet? You have such a striking instance of it in your own dear aunts. They have always been such a united family party. What a comfort it must be to you to be together at last.’

Augusta replied that ‘family feeling’ was indeed a ‘very wonderful thing, especially after forty years’ absence.’

Lansdowne looked amused ; but Miss Aylmer was puzzled by her indirectness. In default of any further ideas of her own, that lady now fell back upon the words of others,—

‘ Ah ! Absence is not always the grave of affection,’ she murmured to the grounds of her tea.

‘ Talking of graves with your feet in the damp grass ! Miss Aylmer, this will never do ! ’

The speaker was Mr. Rudge.

He came up, burdened with his unspoken proposal, in search of its intended recipient.

‘ Allow me to take you for a turn round the garden, Miss Aylmer. So good of you to have taken my advice about coming here, when I gave it as a friend, and not as a doctor. Dr. Lansdowne, excuse me, your foot is upon Miss Aylmer’s dress.’

‘ Pardon me, Mr. Rudge, you are mistaken,’ said that gentleman, displaying two neat boots firmly planted upon the grass.

‘The grass is wet, Miss Aylmer; let us move.’ Mr. Rudge spoke anxiously. He longed to dislodge his charmer, and carry her off to the sidewalks.

Dr. Lansdowne looked down critically, flicking the grass with his cane. It was dry and very dusty, as he intended to prove by the silent action. Mr. Rudge’s impatience grew. Miss Aylmer herself felt fluttered; but being used to experiencing mild perturbations, she never wasted time in inquiring into their causes. She now turned to Augusta, and preposed that they should move up towards the house together, or they might lose Mr. Mortimer’s discourse.

The Miss Crotchets still sat three in a row; but they had by this time been joined by their brother. Miss Lilly greeted Dr. Lansdowne with, ‘We aren’t sick here,’ and Mr. Rudge with ‘Here’s a chair for you,’ thrusting a seat at him. He carefully gave it to Miss Aylmer. She, turning to Mr. Bolton Crotchet,

hoped he had seen 'a house to suit him in Shellford,' and he with suspicious readiness asked after her father's health. He was 'so much better,' she said, 'thanks to Dr. Lansdowne's resources;' a remark which seemed equally displeasing to both Mr. Rudge and Mr. Crotchet, for different reasons doubtless. Augusta, meanwhile, had leisure to observe that the threads of the conversation were entangled, but was not able to unravel them. Underlying interests were clearly, by their conflicting claims, producing these wide divergencies of feeling.

But where was Mr. Mortimer all this time?

Hurrying into his study, in search of the notes for his speech, he had been astonished to find a young man reclining in his own easy chair, its shabby arms supporting him, together with his umbrella and several ancient volumes. 'Jewell's Apology' dropped on the floor, and the youth seemed to become suddenly

aware of his intrusion. Rising to his feet, he explained,

‘My name is John Crotchet, sir; I come from the West Indies. I am here this afternoon, with your permission, to say a few words to you.’

‘Certainly, my young friend. You wish for advice: call upon me to-morrow at eleven; I shall be at your service. Just now I am busy; am, indeed, about to address my people.’

‘I will come and hear you if you will hear me.’

‘I will hear you if you will hear me!’ Was this a remark to be addressed to one who was the undisputed owner of a solid oaken pulpit, with ten steps up to it, and a sounding-board at the top, intended to carry his words to all comers, without their being afterwards heard by him! In the novelty of the situation Mr. Mortimer was scarcely ready with an answer. Once more, however, he collected himself, and replied both manfully and clerically,

‘If, as I gather, you have any questions of a religious nature, or any doubts to state to me, I shall be happy to assist in solving or dispelling them; if, on the contrary, your communications are to take the form of argument or discussion, I must altogether decline to enter upon any controversy with one so much my junior in age and experience.’

‘Yes. You are not a young man,’ said John simply. ‘I could certainly have wished for the advice of one nearer my own standing, with whom the questions of my age might have been more present than they probably are to yourself; but I have ascertained that you, sir, took a degree at the same University I am thinking of entering, and I wish to gather from yourself now your maturer impressions of the value of a University education. I will narrow my question. It has been said, “Happy is he whom Truth itself doth teach, not by figures and words which pass away.” With your remembrance of Cambridge Mathe-

matics, sir, can you endorse this statement? Are you of opinion that, by labouring to acquire such formulæ, I shall not only diminish my present enjoyment, but shall also narrow my appreciation of truth itself?’

‘Undoubtedly such symbols are apt to become very quickly erased from the mind,’ answered the clergyman; to whom all such figures as he had ever acquired were at present represented by a blank.

‘And then again, sir, as to the practical outcome of a University education. In order to embody the subject, I will take a representative case. Let us say, the master of your own college. I suppose, sir, that in common with every other man of your college, you beheld in him the impersonation of wisdom and learning; in his exalted position the end of all your hopes, the goal of all your ambitions. I am certain that it would be so in my own case. I am persuaded that the attainment of such a position must argue the possession,

in an eminent degree, of those qualities in which I find myself lamentably deficient, the lack of which I hope to supply by whatever mode of education I select. I allude especially to the power of influencing others. I am persuaded, after much reflection, that all knowledge which does not bestow this power contains within itself seeds of decay. The ordinary graduate may be a mere lover of books, as I myself now am ; but the master of a college must, it seems to me, be a lover of mankind also. Such a one I have pictured to myself, with sympathies eager to engage themselves in the service of the weakest and most ignorant member of his college, as well as to meet the severest demands of the most enlightened. I should suppose that, with the courtesy and affability of a gentleman amongst his equals, he hastens to divest himself of the authority of the pedagogue, retaining only the untiring industry and the unwearied application learnt by the discipline of the schools.

Lending to each struggling lad in turns the gracious service of his individual thoughts and cares, and out of his larger leisure becoming at once guide, friend, adviser, and almost father, of every man in his college. Such a one I have sometimes thought my own grandfather, Hobbes Crotchet, might have been under different circumstances. It is a worthy ideal, is it not, sir? And one,' added John Crotchet, humbly, 'most removed from my present condition.'

Mr. Mortimer looked at him steadily. Could he be suspected of a joke? No, a joke and John Crotchet had yet to be acquainted. The strange youth was evidently in earnest. He was clearly in the habit of investigating, by his own unaided fancy, such objects as attracted his attention. The solution of all such problems as he happened to meet with, he probably demanded from himself alone; and it must have cost him much now to infringe this rule.

The master of Mr. Mortimer's College had undoubtedly been a person of experience and learning. But then unfortunately the weight of his learning was so great, that it never could rise to the surface. His experience also had become so entirely a part of himself, that he was never able to part with it to anyone. Moreover, the worthy gentleman had never found it possible to remember Humphrey Mortimer's name, perpetually mistaking him for his uncle, who had been drowned fifteen years before in the Cam.

Something of all this passed through Mr. Mortimer's mind, as he answered briefly—

‘Young gentleman, I cannot discuss such weighty subjects with you. You are greatly mistaken in your notions of university life. Your ideas are colonial, and you fall into a vulgar error. The two great universities exist independently of the undergraduates. These are a mere excrescence. The duty of the Heads of Houses is to be, and not to do. They

are the servants of none, least of all of the undergraduates.'

'Excuse me,' said John Crotchet. 'I never was in England before. In the absence of any of the usual sources of information, I have endeavoured to approach the subject with the mind of an unprejudiced inquirer. If the form of my questions displeases you, I hope that at least you will reply to them in substance. Shall I best secure my own moral and intellectual development by securing an academic training? Can I regard in the light of reasonable and attainable objects of ambition the highest rewards the university has to offer? In order to lead an exalted life, I find in myself the necessity of an exalted ambition.'

'Young man!' said Mr. Mortimer, fairly out of patience. 'You study yourself too much and other people's lives too little. Let your imagination run more upon the level; don't goad it up hill. Go out and reflect upon the probable experiences of the first man or woman

you meet in the street ; and you'll be wiser than you are now. Go to college if you will, and when you get there, think about the men you meet, and the women you don't meet ; but let yourself alone, and let the master of your college alone, and let me alone, for pity's sake ! You take up my time unwarrantably. My people are waiting. I must go.'

'I will hear you,' said John meekly.

'The women you don't meet.' 'The first person you meet in the street, man or woman Was it possible Mr. Mortimer had spoken so ? Had he indeed been irritated into delivering himself thus ? Yes, he had, and he remembered it afterwards, half incredulously, with deep regret. John Crotchet remembered it also, and the more he thought of it the more the conviction grew upon him, that Mr. Mortimer's advice deserved his best attention.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHAT THEY ALL SAID.

THE name of Squire Aylmer's nurse was Bridget Weasel. She was a teetotaller of dropsical tendencies. 'Her word,' she was accustomed to say, 'was as good as her name, and as reliable.' There was therefore no reason for doubting her statement, when she averred, that at five minutes to four precisely, when she was pouring out her second cup of tea, and Miss Aylmer had been gone half an hour to the party, Mr. Aylmer changed his position and called for his daughter.

'She should be fetched if he would wait.'

Wait, no! Mr. Aylmer could not wait any longer, for king, lords, or commons; and Mrs. Weasel's experienced eye read it in his coun-

tenance. Should she give a message to his daughter? It wouldn't be the first by many, and when she 'came to it herself' she only hoped 'her last words would be named as faithfully.'

'Write!' He gasped.

'I never weakened my memory by learning, sir.'

'Never marry'——

'No, sir; who? Who isn't Miss Aylmer to marry? The name, for God's sake quick.'

'That doctor who——'

'Yes, sir; which?'

'He knows——unfit——age——circumstances.'

'Dr. Lansdowne, not a doubt about it. Odd it is how unwilling they are to part with their secrets, poor dears, when they've got to part with their souls. He's past hearing or speaking now.'

Giddy hares might frolic still over the upland coppice in the spring, and less exultingly the partridges might stray through the

stubble on mild autumn days, whilst in and out among the oak woods, where the Squire had guarded the underwood so jealously, his daughter might wander with Mr. Rudge; but the Squire gave them all up, and turned away and left the world, just as Mr. Mortimer stepped out upon the grass plot to address his flock.

There was a stir amongst the occupants of the chairs. They shook themselves and sat straight. Miss Fussy, despite her assertion that she did not wish to hear, caught up a child's battledore, and grasping the handle firmly, placed the flat part behind her best ear, to arrest if possible the sound of words. Mr. Rudge leant tenderly over Miss Aylmer. Dr. Lansdowne reclined on the grass at Augusta Crotchet's feet and took his little girl upon his knee. Thus placed he was quite invisible to Mr. Mortimer.

That gentleman began by praising his flock, for were they not his own, and was not the flame of their mild zeal fanned every week

by his breath? Did he not also direct the issues of their charitable emotions? Were not ‘the poor visited and the sick healed;’ for ‘intimate as was the connection between soul and body, so intimate should be the connection between services rendered to either.’ Mr. Mortimer had always felt that ‘the clergyman and the doctor worked each to best advantage when working hand in hand. This he must say had always been the case hitherto in their favoured parish.’

Under his old friend and churchwarden, Mr. Rudge, the humblest had received immediate attention, since the work of the Dispensary was admirably conducted by his assistant, Mr. Timlings.

Now, however, Mr. Mortimer regretted to say that Mr. Timlings ‘had proposed to send in his resignation to the Board, at their next sitting.’ He was ‘not prepared to enter into all the reasons which might be assigned for such a step; but ‘this much he felt called upon

to say—we only perform a duty to others, in requiring that they should perform their duties towards us! Now had they clear consciences when they thought of the poor pittance, the miserable mite, which they offered to this, the only son of a widowed mother, for all the anxious days and nights, for all the care and thought and toil, for the terrible responsibility and the unmerited blame, which he was always liable to incur, in the service of *their* poor?’

‘Wear and tear of boots,’ suggested Miss Lilly, but nobody heard her; and Miss Aylmer was so affected that she began to cry.

After a pause spent in recollecting what he had been saying, Mr. Mortimer continued—

He ‘never allowed himself to be personal, but he must observe that there *were* hands, and there *was* an influence, whose interference in the management of the Dispensary must, he foresaw, result in nothing less than a divorce of the interests of soul and body!’

Dr. Lansdowne took his fingers out of Violet's curls, whilst an odd smile played round his lips.

‘These are the hands; this is the influence: at your feet,’ he said to Augusta Crotchet. ‘I shall answer him presently. He does not know I am here. What is he saying now? Your deaf aunt is asking you.’

‘It's about Mr. Timlings' feelings, Aunt Fussy,’ said Augusta, ‘and that if you've agreed in the last observations, you're to contribute something to induce him to stay, to raise his salary.’

‘Begging! I thought as much. They always take care you shall hear that. No! I'm deaf. Take the battledore, Augusta.’

Mr. Mortimer and Mr. Rudge led the way with five-pound notes; Miss Lilly followed with a sovereign. ‘Here it is! John! Come and hand it over.’ Others succeeded, rapidly descending to five shilling tenders.

The meeting was becoming quite exciting.

Really it was almost as good as bidding at an auction. Miss Lilly sent triumphant glances in the direction of Dr. Lansdowne and her niece. Augusta knew that her aunt regarded him as her accomplice in the matter of that bar, and that she was revenging herself upon him.

Suddenly a revolution took place. From the very bosom of his own lawn, unorthodoxy arose, to confront the astounded vicar.

‘Now for a scrimmage,’ said Rosy purring.

‘Dear Miss Augusta Crotchet, have you any salts?’ murmured the Squire’s sensitive daughter.

Expectation lost its breath. What would Dr. Lansdowne say, or do? Can you call a parson out? Can you county court him? Can you write to the Bishop? Can you prosecute him for slander? Now indeed Miss Fussy suffered. She rose from her chair, she knocked over the child Violet, she forced her way up to the speaker, placing her ear in a line with his lips, so that every word he uttered must be fired

through her skull. She lost the apology at the beginning, for addressing them ‘uninvited,’ but she heard this—and did not believe her ears.

‘I beg to propose an amendment upon the motion already put forward, namely—That in the event of Mr. Timlings resigning the office of Parish Doctor and Dispenser, a fund be raised to present him with a handsome testimonial at parting; towards which object I should be happy to put my own name down for a hundred and fifty pounds!’

‘*A hundred and fifty pounds!*’ The company gasped! It never saw such a sum. So much money took away its breath. It looked at Dr. Lansdowne as though it had never seen him before. Curiosity and interest scanned every line in his features; every thread in his clothing. He stood before them as an animated cheque-book, capable of representing figures to any amount.

Mr. Rudge’s countenance fell. ‘There’s a motive in all this! There’s more than meets

the eye!’ he said, looking at his rival as though to decipher some discreditable hieroglyphic traced somewhere upon his person. As for Mr. Mortimer, he forgot all the words with which he had meant to conclude.

One man and one only in that astonished assembly felt himself quite equal to dealing with this crisis. He was used to money, and he was used to public meetings; he was accustomed to take the lead, and he had always intended to let Shellford know it; that man was Mr. Bolton Crotchet. Now was his opportunity.

‘I beg to second the motion put forward by Dr. Lansdowne. I am, perhaps, scarcely in possession of more than the outlines of the subject; but from what I have seen of Dr. Lansdowne, I should be inclined to put faith in his judgment. I am a stranger amongst you; I have only just returned to my native land, after an absence of forty years. But my father was an ancient resident and landowner here, Mr. Hobbes Crotchet, of the Squire’s House.

And my sisters have been living and dying amongst you. I hope to do the same. I have a family interest in all that concerns your parish, which I hope to continue and extend. Perhaps you will permit me to offer you the results of my varied experience, in cases, differing certainly in detail, but similar in fact, to the one now before you. If I understand your respected Vicar rightly, you have amongst you an excellent young parish doctor, who wishes, as the phrase is, "to better himself." The question arises, is he to be helped or hindered? Well, my verdict is this,—Whenever or wherever a man wants to go, except out of this world, let him go; and send your blessing with him! Forty years ago I wanted to go to Jamaica. Did my father hinder me? No. He spent his dying breath in urging me on. What is the result? That I am here amongst you this day, a far richer and more useful inhabitant than I should otherwise have been. My son John, there, wants to go to College.

Well; I buy him a cap and gown, and hope they'll fit him; and I shall be happy to put my name down after Dr. Lansdowne's for fifty pounds to help this other young fellow on in life.'

'Fifty pounds' worth of spite!' said Miss Lilly, angrily.

'Against your twenty shillings' worth of the same article, then,' chuckled Rosy. Rosy always appreciated any arrangement of circumstances displeasing to Lilly.

Miss Lilly was mistaken. Her brother had put down that fifty pounds to get a hearing in Shellford. It was an advertisement simply. A bid for authority. A notification that he came among them as one who meant to have an opinion upon any subject that might turn up. One, moreover, who was not prepared to follow of necessity the orthodox leaders of thought in Shellford, but who intended himself to be a leader and a guide.

But Mr. Bolton Crotchet had not done yet.

He had ‘a remark to make, which he hoped the Vicar would pardon, and the churchwarden not misunderstand. Some excellent observations had been addressed to them upon the advisability of the physician and the priest working “hand in hand.” Well and good; but there was another aspect of the case; and he could not believe that they would show less liberality of spirit and less desire to hear the other side, than he had met with in remote quarters of the globe.’

His hearers immediately became aware that a fairer, juster, body of persons could be found nowhere under the sun; and they burned to hear that ‘other side,’ the existence of which they would have denied but now.

‘What they had to guard against, then, was the appearance of the physician and the priest playing into each other’s hands!’

Mr. Rudge cried out as though they’d drawn his eye tooth. Mr. Mortimer started up, but his words choked him.

‘As an outsider,’ Mr. Bolton Crotchet ‘merely suggested the appearances to be avoided for the sake of outsiders. For his own part, he did not mind confessing he much preferred the sight of a sound sinner to that of a sick saint. Such ought also, he contended, to be the feeling of every unbiassed medical man. But if the doctor was to regard himself as the pioneer of the parson, how could this be? A doctor had no more right to console himself by the reflection that what was bad for the body was good for the soul, than the clergyman had to comfort himself by the parallel consideration that what was bad for the soul was—as it often undoubtedly was—good for the body! A doctor had no more right to forgive himself for having failed to keep a man in this world because he had gone to a better, than a clergyman had to congratulate himself that because a man would not attend to him in this world, he had gone to a worse.’

Mr. Bolton Crotchet, therefore, ‘demurred

to the proposition laid down, that it was important to fence in the care of the sick poor, in order that the Doctors of Divinity and Medicine might be enabled to combine their performances, in the shape of a harmonious duet. Superior excellence singly was the thing to be aimed at. An accord between the two might safely be left to follow. He trusted that the Vicar and he should be none the worse friends because he had inaugurated their friendship by differing from him upon his own grounds.'

'Manners, last !' said Miss Lilly.

Shellford felt quite proud and pleased. Here was money flying about in all directions ; and quite a variety of opinions, such as had never been heard before. 'The independence of the Colonies ;' this must be what it meant. Self-government, and gold to be had for the digging, were evidently items in Mr. Crotchet's experience. Nor was there wanting in some calm bosoms a certain satisfaction that the

Rev. Humphrey Mortimer, he who had laid down the law for them unquestioned many times a week, should now see for himself how the law looked when viewed from beneath instead of from above. That gentleman, however, quickly regained his good temper in the pleasure of conceiving a little joke. He came up to Miss Lilly, rubbing his hands and exclaiming, ‘What a feat of Alms, Miss Crotchet! Spell it with an L.’

CHAPTER XIV.

WHAT THEY ALL MEANT.

DR. LANSDOWNE was almost afraid to look at Augusta Crotchet, lest he should read in her face the painful conviction that her father's speech was an extremely foolish one. He marvelled, himself, at such a proceeding, on the part of a sensible man of the world. But no, Augusta was merely wishing it were possible to know 'what they all meant.'

With a view to this enlightenment she presently asked, 'Have you such a high opinion of Mr. Timlings, as to be willing to give all that money to buy him a teapot?'

'Not I. The money is a statement of the value I set upon his absence. It is also a

token of my good-will towards the poor people here, whose miserable lives may be prolonged by his departure with the teapot. Further, it is an expression of my desire for the advancement of medical science in Shellford. I'd give treble that sum to be rid of old Rudge himself. He is worn out. I've not a scrap of personal feeling in the matter of Rudge. It would rejoice me to see him depart in possession of a fortune to-morrow, and I'm not without hopes. I fancy he has his eye upon one. As for his friend Timlings, there the case is different. He is a conceited young Jackanapes. He wants a good drubbing in his professional pestle and mortar. And I have no doubt he'll get it, if we can only drive him out of this corner. To get a properly educated young man up to the modern standard in his place, would be half the battle fought.'

'How much you care about it!'

'Care about it. Of course I do. What else is there left for me to care about, except

my children and my profession? But I will tell you a secret. It is not an interesting one. It concerns only myself. You will not choose to hear it?’

‘Yes, I will. You may set it down to simple curiosity.’

‘Well, then, my professional interests do not naturally exercise a magnetic power over me. On the contrary, their force was originally repulsive, but I hold on desperately to these things, in the absence of others which need not be specified. Also, because I happen to be aware that the consequences of letting go my hold would be disastrous for myself and others. There’s my secret for you, with nothing in it, after all.’

As he made this confession, lines of weariness about his mouth contradicted the brightness of his smile.

‘Then you are not really enthusiastic? Yet you seem to be so.’

‘Enthusiastic! No! Old Rudge has more

enthusiasm than I. Think, Miss Crotchet. Can you really suppose the knowledge that under my care Hephzibah Clackett may linger on, in the extremity of bodily suffering and of mental depression, some three weeks longer than she might do under Mr. Timlings' hands can be sufficient to support me, under the perpetually recurring sense of the utter inexplicability of my own life? Add Betsy Sudds to Hephzibah Clackett and throw in Squire Aylmer. Still where am I? Can my faith in my own treatment of any case whatever, replace to me my lost faith in my own power of combining somehow, not infortuitously, the elements of my private happiness with those of public and social well-being?'

‘What do most people do then?’

‘Make their own fortunes I suppose, aiming at one world or two, according to the measure of their capacity or their faith. I don't care about making money myself; my father made it for me. He was a well-known London physi-

cian. He succeeded in life—I have failed; though I may not be able to show you how. Sometimes I am inclined to fling it all up here, but now that I have entered upon this campaign with Mr. Rudge, I shall stay to see the end of it.’

Like most girls, Augusta’s interest in a subject depended upon her discernment of a living element in it. All this therefore excited both her imagination and her sympathy. He had the trick of manner which reassures and breaks down reserve more certainly than many more enduring recommendations. In spite of herself she began to feel confidence in him, but his tone saddened her. She had taken him for a man who, from religious or scientific motives, devoted himself to the service of the poor. In his apparent denial of such motives, and in his open rejection of that complacency which is apt to accompany them, she was at first disposed to disparage the actions themselves. Most people would have been tempted to do so perhaps,

but then Augusta looked further than most. His modes of thought and action, as mere studies, arrested her attention ; and whereas upon the testimony of the latter she had begun to exalt him, so now after a few moments' reflection she refused to dethrone him upon the apparent contradiction of the former. On the contrary, she was soon prepared to set him up a peg or two higher as an unconscious hero who could do good after a superior fashion, without the afflatus of windy self-esteem, or the impetus of self-regarding motives, to carry him over obstacles.

Hitherto she had considered self-assurance his chief fault. Now he had gone far to right himself in this respect in her eyes. His depressing views of life she attributed to his wife's death ; and whether as the sorrowing widower, the tender parent, or the self-denying physician, he gained more in her estimation by this one day's intercourse than she would have cared to own.

She was persuaded that she had hitherto misjudged him. She was therefore quite ready to atone for the mistake by a little decided partisanship, should Fate and her Aunt Lilly seem to demand it.

If he could have seen the picture she was drawing of him, he would scarcely have recognised it; and she, on her part, could never have guessed the way in which he was thinking of her. How pleasant he found it to talk to this girl about himself, and to awaken her sympathies in that deserving object. The very beauty of her face provoked him. It owed so much, whilst it was meant to owe so little, to the serenity of girlish happiness and health. There was a spirit there which he longed to awaken. Each time that he saw her, his very thirst for perfection made him desire to intensify the shadowy picture before him. He wanted nothing for himself he would have said, yet at the next instant he was living in some supreme moment wherein she smiled on him, not as

now with the mere ripple of the lips, but with the soul-surrendering smile of the passionate woman. Thus each idealised the other, dwelling in the reality, yet playing with the dream.

‘Oh, dear Miss Crotchet, do pray tell me which fund ought we to subscribe to, the testimonial or the other?’ said Miss Aylmer to her neighbour. ‘All these different accounts are so perplexing, and in dear Papa’s absence I do feel the responsibility so. In our position it is so important to set a right example.’

‘Ask yourself in the first place if you’re a fool, or if you’re not; and act accordingly,’ said Lilly bluntly.

‘Oh! dear Miss Lilly. That is so wise and clear. Just like yourself. You always are so sure about everything, but really there always are duties attaching to the possession of property.’

‘I wish there was always property

attaching to the possession of duties,' said that lady promptly.

'Duty brings its own reward, does it not, Mr. Rudge?' observed Miss Aylmer to her neglected admirer.

'And dear the pay is, at the price,' muttered Lilly.

'Beauty cannot be restored!' 'Is that what you said?' asked Fussy, catching the sound, but not the words. 'What's that to you and me, that never had any to lose?'

Now Mr. Rudge was far from feeling that duty brought its own reward. Here he was, quite ready to be rewarded himself. As ready and as deserving as any man in England. Moreover, he was conscious of having shown both modesty and moderation in his choice of a recompense.

Only a country heiress, neither young nor good-looking, in return for all those years of hard work and harder virtue, both during the lifetime and since the decease of the late Mrs.

Rudge. Yet here he stood, with both hands stretched out to grasp the prize, and still it tarried. Therefore, in reply to Miss Aylmer's appeal as to the solvency of duty, he responded doubtfully. Then, with a view to settling the question practically, he again proposed a walk round the garden.

Believing that he was anxious to bring before her Mr. Timlings' claims, she consented, with only the hesitation common to the performance of every action of her life.

They turned into a long shrubby walk.

'I must be returning to my father directly,' she said.

'Miss Aylmer, I may or may not have done my duty here,' said Mr. Rudge, plunging in boldly after his bait, 'but of this at least I am certain, that I have always endeavoured to do it, and that its reward lies in *your* hands.' She did not seem to understand. Winking rapidly, she put up her parasol—that was all.

'You mean, I suppose, that since Dr. Lans-

downe came he has been taking your duties out of your hands. It is hard upon you when you have been here so long, but he seems a nice young man, and I daresay he does not mean it. It really was so kind of him to give Mr. Timlings that large sum, when he has only been such a short time in Shellford, comparatively ; but you, of course, are our oldest friend, and I've no doubt Papa will give you something for Mr. Timlings too.'

'It is not for Mr. Timlings, but for myself, that I wish to speak to you, Miss Aylmer. You will miss your father's support and company very much. Your position will be a difficult one. I trust that you will turn to me for help and comfort. I have mentioned the subject to your father. I have a favour to ask.'

'There is somebody coming,' said Miss Aylmer. And so there was. Mr. Rudge was urgently wanted. The messenger was at the back door. Would Miss Aylmer do him the favour to wait a moment and he would see

her home? He would run to the house and would return.

She had guessed his meaning now. Whatever were his ideas upon the subject, it was not in the heart of woman, plain and forty-three, to refuse to wait five minutes for an offer of marriage. Indeed, she was becoming quite hysterical; what with her father's illness, her own prospective independence, and Mr. Rudge's 'wishes,' life was assuming quite a startling appearance. All this wanted thinking over. So she turned again into the deserted avenue. Deserted, save that at the farthest corner two eager children played.

Humphrey Mortimer was busy digging a grave, by means of which Algernon Lansdowne proposed to descend to the lower regions. It had occurred to this desperate little materialist, that by personal testimony he might be able to establish or refute the astonishing statements made about that undesirable locality. He now paused with a barrowload of earth in his hand to inquire—

‘Does your papa put people down there when they die?’

‘Yes,’ answered Humphrey, ‘so it can’t be far, but I don’t think we shall get there to-night.’

‘Then it must be quite easy to get back?’

‘That it isn’t, I say. Where’s your mamma? Did my papa put *her* down there?’

‘No. He didn’t. Say that again, and I’ll fight you. She went up the other way. She went one night when we were all in bed. I’ll tell you a secret. My papa cried. *I* didn’t, because I guessed she’d come back again.’

‘Ah! that’s miles and miles farther,’ said the parson’s son. ‘It must be twice as hard to get up there.’

‘They can come down easier, though,’ said Algernon.

‘That they can’t.’

‘They can then, for I’ve seen them.’

‘It is not true. You never saw anyone that did it,’ said Humphrey, pausing in his work.

‘It is true,’ said Algernon Lansdowne solemnly. ‘I did not see them coming down, but I did see them after they had come, only it’s a secret and I must not tell it you.’

‘If I give you something. Do please. I’ve got lots of things.’

‘You’ve got an accordion with sixteen notes. Fetch it first while I think.’

Humphrey ran off, brushing past Miss Aylmer, but she did not like children, and was unwilling to interfere with them at any time. They on their part considered her beneath their attention.

‘It isn’t broken, is it? All right. Well then,’ said Algernon speaking with childish gravity and lowering his voice, ‘It was my dear mamma. She did come back. We saw her. We blew her a kiss, only she didn’t look up. Violet is so little she forgets, but I don’t. She was all in white and she had been crying. Afterwards my papa took her away again, and I was dreadfully sorry. That is all.’

‘Did you tell your papa you saw her?’ asked the other, earnestly.

‘No. He didn’t see us, but I asked him afterwards where mamma was gone to? And he said, “To Heaven, and she would never come back any more!” So it *was* true.’

What extraordinary creatures children were, Miss Aylmer thought, overhearing fragments of this conversation.

Then she dismissed the unimportant subject from her preoccupied mind, and turned to the more weighty considerations of mature age, which knows how to get to heaven or hell; is certain of never returning; but possesses no ‘secret’ by which it can purchase its heart’s desires in this world.

Had Mrs. Mortimer been in Miss Aylmer’s place, she, with her more intimate knowledge of childish natures, might have judged them differently. Much good cake would she have given to have heard what had been said, but owing to the freemasonry of children, it was little likely ever to reach her ears.

CHAPTER XV.

JOHN CROTCHET'S EDUCATION.

WHEN Mr. Rudge was recalled to the house, he found Bridget Weasel standing just inside the back door. He knew at once that death had relieved guard, and that the Squire's case was out of his hands. Dr. Lansdowne was there also, having likewise been summoned by Mrs. Weasel.

‘Which of you two gentlemen is coming round?’ she inquired in the neutral tone suitable to a reliable teetotaller who hopes for good cases under both doctors.

‘The case was Mr. Rudge's,’ said Lansdowne, turning away. ‘I was merely called in in consultation.’

Mr. Rudge replied by ordering Mrs. Weasel to return at once to the 'Squire's House,' as she must not be seen by Miss Aylmer. He promised to follow her immediately.

Then he stepped back into the garden to consider his situation.

The company were fast departing; the news of the Squire's death had not reached any of them as yet; and Miss Aylmer was safe from hearing it where she was.

What should Mr. Rudge do? Return to her and finish his conversation as if nothing had happened? No. It would revolt her afterwards to know under what unsuitable circumstances she had been wooed. Go back, and by acquainting her with her father's death postpone indefinitely his own chances? He was not willing to do that. Take her straight home, and say nothing further either about his own hopes or her orphaned condition, leaving her to think what she liked, for the time being, of this change in his conduct? No. Such a

plan would be frustrated at once by her curiosity or anxiety.

In all this, it must be observed, Mr. Rudge was thinking of himself only, and not of Miss Aylmer.

In his embarrassment he pulled out his pocket-book and wrote her a note ; directed it, and looked round for a messenger. Nearly everyone was gone ; but his eye lighted on John Crotchet standing still in the place which he had occupied during the speeches, as though a few days or hours were of no consequence to him.

He was, in fact, following Mr. Mortimer's movements in the hope of again engaging him in conversation ; but Mr. Mortimer was as carefully shunning him.

Mr. Rudge took a few steps irresolutely towards the shrubbery. Then he returned and accosted John Crotchet—

‘Mr. John Crotchet, I believe?’

John bowed awkwardly.

‘Excuse me, sir. I am called away hurriedly by a patient. At least by a death. Would you do me a slight favour? I cannot delay. You seem to be at leisure. Between ourselves, it’s Squire Aylmer. That is Miss Aylmer there. You know her? The lady in the distance. The only one left in the avenue. Green and purple gown. Would you give her this note for me? It informs her of my being suddenly called away. She expects me to see her home. Beg her not to wait for me. I am prevented. I will meet her at her own house. I shall be there as soon as she is. You need not say any more, you know. She must not meet me just now. I am agitated. He was an old friend. What a pleasant party! You understand! Much obliged! *Good evening.*’

All this in a breath to John Crotchet, who never knew the right thing to say or do upon the commonest occasion.

As Mr. Rudge drove off he passed the Miss Crotchets and their niece walking home. They

were escorted by Dr. Lansdowne, and were preceded by two tumbled children, one of whom carried a double accordion.

Mr. Rudge enjoyed passing them ; for, in spite of the running that Lansdowne had made, in spite of Mr. Timlings' inconvenient ambitions, in spite of the dead Squire's opposition, and in spite of everybody, he felt that he was about to triumph. In anticipation he already fingered the Squire's money, handled his keys, read his will, drank his wine, and married his daughter ! At length success and Mr. Rudge sat side by side in the narrow gig, and drove away together.

Meanwhile the Mortimers' guests had departed. They themselves, hearing of the Squire's death and missing his daughter, concluded that she had gone home in consequence. They called in their children, collected their furniture, and, in the excitement of the fatal news, forgot all about Dr. Lansdowne's ill-timed appearance at their party.

Still John Crotchet lingered unseen at one end of the tree-covered walk with Mr. Rudge's letter in his hand ; and still Miss Aylmer turned and turned wearily at the other end of it, astonished and impatient at the delay of the offer that came not.

To account for his reluctance it must be explained that the letter which John Crotchet held was (he concluded from Mr. Rudge's words) intended to convey to Miss Aylmer the news of her father's death.

John Crotchet resented the errand. What possible business was it of his that he should be made the bearer of such tidings? Were not the threads of his own experience intricate enough as it was, that the snapped and ravelled ends of other peoples' lives must be entangled with them? If the world should prove to be so full of obstacles, how could he draw out his twisted lines to their fullest length? Hope of extrication from personal embarrassment at this rate would become impossible.

It was all very well for Mr. Rudge to say—‘You know her. Give her this note.’ He did not know her, except by sight. He could not give her such a message, and turn away like the postman. Women, he had always heard, fainted or fell down upon the least provocation. She might do one or both now. It was intolerable. He would go home and post the letter.

Suddenly Mr. Mortimer’s advice recurred to him :—‘Go out and study the probable experiences of the first man or woman you meet, and you’ll be wiser than you are now.’ After all it might be true. Here was his first opportunity. It offered experiences novel enough to merit attention. Mr. Mortimer suggested such practical studies as a form of education. Well, he desired to educate himself, and he would not neglect the lesson.

There are limits to the time during which even the meekest of women will wait for a lover’s appearance ; and in Miss Aylmer’s case

these limits were now reached. Yet to have lived forty-three years in a world mainly kept going by marrying; to have read the introduction to the long-delayed chapter, and then to have found that the leaf was uncut, and the chapter doomed to remain unfinished, this was enough to make a weak-tempered woman a trifle angry. It made her suspicious too of the words and ways of the next man that happened to cross her path. The next man stood before her in the person of John Crotchet, shame-faced and embarrassed, with a note extended towards her. As became a discreet woman she turned from him.

‘Take it!’ he said; ‘Mr. Rudge sends it,’ offering her his umbrella first, then the note in his left hand. This left-handedness was a habit of childhood, which always overtook him when agitated.

Miss Aylmer took it and moved on towards the high road. In passing she looked hard at John Crotchet, as though to inquire what

possible connection he could have with Mr. Rudge and his letter. John was unused to such attention. Most people thought that they knew all about him that was worth knowing. Beyond the binding of his outer man, which was stout and likely to wear well, they seldom considered him at all.

Mindful of the supposed contents of the note, he persisted in following her closely; until she, longing to read it, and disliking his scrutiny, turned and spoke to him. 'I am much obliged to you, but I will not give you any further trouble. I was expecting to hear from Mr. Rudge. Did you say he had gone home?'

'Yes,' said John hurriedly. 'He has been called away. There was no one else left, so he asked me to deliver this note. You were to read it.' This he said, glancing at the unopened scrawl uneasily; then adding—

'As I am going back to the "Garden House," I will walk with you if you've no objection.'

Miss Aylmer opened the letter to see that it was all right. Yes. It was all there. Yet it was rather a dull tale after all. Mr. Rudge made his apologies, and explained his 'wishes;' using much the same terms as he had done in speaking to her father; scarcely tenderer. Then, by way of preparation for the sad news she must learn so quickly, he spoke of her 'unprotected condition,' and of her need of 'a companion after her father's approaching removal.'

As she read this, John Crotchet's fears were justified. Tears began to roll down her cheeks. She wished the man would go away. Why couldn't he leave her! No such obvious idea seemed to cross his mind. He tramped along beside her, gazing into her face with a strange mixture of curiosity and pity. Every moment he seemed about to speak, but as though finding utterance unaccountably difficult.

'I am very sorry,' he said at last. He found himself more queerly affected by a woman's

tears than he would have thought possible. Indeed, he would have spoken sooner, had he not stopped to analyse the sensation. He had never watched any woman cry before, except Augusta in fits of childish anger, and he had never minded those tears. He supposed that if he saw some woman weep every day he should soon get used to it, and should not mind it more than he now minded seeing it rain. He might even class the two facts together, as disagreeable yet salutary phenomena.

‘I am very sorry,’ he repeated.

‘Oh ! never mind,’ said she, wiping her eyes. ‘I am no doubt unnecessarily affected : but then, as your dear aunts always tell me, I am quite absurdly sensitive, and Mr. Rudge’s letter has upset me.’

‘I thought it would,’ he answered. Miss Aylmer stared at him in astonishment.

‘How ?’ she said. ‘I do not understand.’

‘Mr. Rudge told me about it,’ said John Crotchet.

‘How very strange of poor dear Mr. Rudge,’ she answered colouring.

She was growing more and more fluttered. All things unusual seemed grouping themselves together in her path. The tardy offer of one man, after five-and-twenty years’ acquaintance, during many of which he might have made it with a better grace and a better chance, seemed hardly less strange than his conversing upon the subject with this other man, whom she had scarcely seen before.

She was, however, less surprised than she would have been had such things happened singly. She had reached the limits of her astonishment, and all lines of emotion were being rapidly obliterated by the rise of purely hysteric feeling.

She did not know whether she was glad or sorry, pleased or displeased with Mr. Rudge’s words. Equally she did not know whether she was flattered or insulted by John’s persistence. She only knew that things were getting queerer

and queerer, and her own sensations odder and odder.

John, for his part, found talking easier, when he had once begun. So, pursuing what he supposed to be the subject under discussion, namely Mr. Aylmer's death, he continued—

‘Mr. Rudge seemed quite agitated when he gave me the message. He felt it very much. I should in his place, I mean in yours; but perhaps you expected it?’

‘Oh, no!’ she answered at random.

John Crotchet's sympathetic education was progressing when he extended his observations to Mr. Rudge, for Miss Aylmer's sake. Hitherto he had not spelt even the initiatory letters of that alphabet whose A, B, C, consists in the transfer of another's experience to oneself.

Finding himself encouraged, rather than repulsed, he was now emboldened to fall back upon his usual habit of asking questions, instead of imparting information.

‘What shall you do?’ he said.

‘Go home at once.’

‘Yes, that will be best. That is what I should do, if I lost mine.’

‘What *do* you mean? If you lost what?’

‘Why, my father, of course.’

‘Your father!’ She stopped short, and removed her handkerchief from her eyes. ‘You don’t mean—but I have not lost my father. He is very ill, I know; but—oh! It is not that? What did Mr. Rudge say to you?’

There was a cry of entreaty in her voice. Her eyes looked straight into his tell-tale face, with no trace of affectation now, tearing the answer from his unwilling lips.

‘Why! what he tells you in that letter, I suppose,’ he stammered, more deeply moved than he had ever been in his life before.

‘In the letter he tells me that he wants—wishes—he says that he was “called away.” “Some one” very ill. Oh! not my father! Not dead?’

‘Well, yes,’ said poor John. ‘I rather gathered that—he had unfortunately happened—just—to die.’

Then Miss Aylmer, bursting into a low and sudden fit of weeping, cried—

‘Oh! no! no! not that. He only said he wanted to marry me.’

With these words she flung herself down upon a grass bank by the roadside, and broke into unrestrained cries of hysteric agony.

Here was a nice situation for a shy young man! John Crotchet looked up and down the road; it was a quiet country spot, about equidistant from the Vicarage and the Squire’s House. No one was in sight, and no one was particularly likely to come. The last of the Mortimers’ guests had long ago preceded them. He would have been thankful to have seen his aunts, Augusta, or even Mr. Rudge; but only the unresponsive trees, the long dusty road, and the unhelpful gateposts met his eye. There were no dwellinghouses nearer than

the Squire's House, and this was still some distance off. So John Crotchet stood, for the first time in his life, forced from his usual employment of developing himself inwardly, compelled to bring himself outwardly into accordance with foreign circumstances.

‘John’s a fig, that flowers inside,’ Miss Lilly had once said, and it was not a bad description of her nephew. Uninteresting externally, but rich at heart, as might appear at some distant day.

Most young men in his awkward position, would have felt their task rendered harder by the age and appearance of the lady ; but here, at least, John had an advantage over other men. As he had never consciously considered any woman before, except his sister, this aspect of affairs did not strike him. She was, he supposed, the usual age for women no longer girls ; and as to her looks, beyond the fact that none of her features were missing, his critical judgment failed. It was, therefore,

no harder to him to devote himself to her than to any other woman, however young or good-looking.

After staring at her for a few moments in helpless silence, an idea came to him.

‘I’ll go on to your house and see if it’s true ; and then I’ll send some one to help you. Perhaps it’s a mistake. He might not quite have died. Why should he want a doctor if he had ?’

He turned to go.

‘Oh ! no ! no !’ she cried, ‘don’t leave me ! I know he’s dead. He’s dead ! What shall I do ? You are so kind, please don’t leave me, Mr. Crotchet.’

‘Oh ! certainly not, if you object.’

He sat down beside her on the grass, wishing he knew how near Society in general, and Miss Aylmer in particular, would wish him to sit.

‘What should I do, supposing she were another fellow ?’ he asked himself in his perplexity.

‘Get up and walk away as fast as my feet would carry me,’ was the answer ; ‘and next time I saw him, cross over the road, until he had had time to recover.’

The use of his legs had as yet always helped John Crotchet out of his troubles. With some such idea, sympathetically transferred to his companion, he now drew nearer.

‘Won’t you get up, take my arm, and try if you can’t walk it off?’

After a time she did remove her hands from her face and tried to rise, but sinking back again, to his dismay, burst into renewed sobs.

What would Mr. Rudge have done in his place? So questioning, by way of consolation, he stammered,

‘If you marry Mr. Rudge it won’t matter so much.’

‘Oh ! Mr. Crotchet ! how can you say such a thing ! Of course I can’t think of it now.

And I shall be such a poor helpless thing, left alone in the world with no one to care what becomes of me.'

'Shall you be so very *poor* then?' he asked innocently.

'Oh no. Not in that way,' she said. This consideration revived her, for getting up and taking his arm, she added—

'But I cannot see why I should discuss these matters with *you*.'

John simply stared. Any motive for such a remark was utterly beyond his imagination.

They walked for some time in silence. They were getting near to the house. Miss Aylmer was quietly crying, and John was vainly trying to invent any other remark of a soothing or diverting nature. But since her last observation nothing further would occur to him. He was now making accurate observations of her personal appearance. Under her influence the education of his perceptive faculties had also begun ; but it had

not yet arrived at the stage of comparison. He simply wondered how her curls were made, noticed the colours of her dress, and reflected upon the absurdity of the custom which led a man and woman to go walking along arm-in-arm. Failing to detect the sentiment beneath the inconvenient reality, he remarked presently—

‘You can walk alone quite well now.’

‘Indeed, I scarcely can, Mr. Crotchet. I tremble so.’

‘Then take my umbrella and use it as a walking-stick. You were not leaning upon me.’

‘I will lean, indeed I will, if you will let me;’ and as she spoke they turned into the lane leading up to the house, and saw Mr. Rudge coming towards them.

He walked straight up to Miss Aylmer, removed her hand from John Crotchet’s arm to his own, and thanked him for bringing her, as though she were a fragment of personal property directed to himself.

He was proceeding to express great surprise at her delay in coming, when she cut him short by questions, choked with sobs, about her father's death.

Mr. Rudge was taken aback. He turned angrily upon John, who nodded in reply to his indignant question.

‘Yes. She knows it.’

‘Unfeeling! unmanly!’ exclaimed Rudge. ‘My dear, when I did it all to spare your nerves, to think that he should have told you!’

But Miss Aylmer turned from Mr. Rudge's expressions of affection and wrath, to say how ‘good and kind’ John Crotchet had been. Almost clinging to him, she endeavoured to hide her embarrassment with Mr. Rudge, whose offer of marriage lay, all wet with tears, in her pocket.

John withdrew from her side, wishing her ‘good-bye’; then irritated into expression by something insulting in Rudge's manner of eyeing him, said earnestly,

‘I hope you'll get over it soon. I am not

used to these things, and perhaps they don't strike me quite as they do others; but I wish your father were alive again, with all my heart. I would set him up upon his legs at once if I had the power.'

It was more than Mr. Rudge would have done. No such disinterested and truthful statement of feeling was possible to him, and he knew it. The knowledge only served to increase his annoyance with 'young Crotchet's forwardness.'

'Well! well! Come in, my dear,' he said impatiently. 'At such a moment you cannot wish to be detained.'

He took possession of her and led her in, whilst John set off at a rapid rate homewards, sure to be late for his aunts' supper.

He had failed to learn the things which he had hoped from Mr. Mortimer; but he had learnt others which he had not dreamed of, and they gave him plenty of food for silent thought.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE EXPRESSION OF A DOUBT.

‘THE Squire’s dead, Rebecca!’

Miss Lilly spoke. Her servant was clearing away the supper, and she had stayed behind in the dining-room, anxious for once to be beforehand in news with Rebecca. John had brought the tidings, and Miss Lilly was anxious to discuss them at her ease. ‘He went off quite quietly at five minutes to four, with nobody by but Nurse Weasel. They’re the first words Mr. John has carried to purpose since he came to England.’

‘There, Miss Crotchet; do let talking of deaths alone! You make me creep, worse than new flannel. I never knew such a family.

Mr. John too! Why, even the dumbest of you find your tongues when it's for naming corpses! It's as bad as the undertaker's man, who told me himself, that he couldn't for the life of him go to church without measuring the people for coffins during the service. I never could endure such gossip. Nobody ever heard me at it, when any of *you* died, nor yet when my own father went, though he did go off peacefully, saying—"shut that door"—when he had left me all the expenses of the funeral, and two half-brothers in a china shop, and a step-sister in a Berlin wool to keep! You've had your own supper, Miss Lilly, and now you've spoilt my appetite for mine. And what had Mr. John to do with it, I should like to know?'

Rebecca wanted to satisfy the hunger of her curiosity, without letting her mistress see the meal.

'I told you,' said that lady stiffly.

'No one has any need to be dragging his name into their families, I'm sure. He's the

civilest, silentest young gentleman I ever came across. He thinks more than he says, does Mr. John. He is like me in that. The other takes after you, Miss Lilly; she says more than she thinks, but I reckon she knows the language better. He cannot always christen his thought, I can see that. Those are my opinions!’

‘And cheap they are,’ said Miss Lilly, ‘considering how you give them when they’re not asked for.’

‘Everybody’s are,’ said Rebecca, ‘as cheap as sand and just as plenty, except parsons’ and doctors’ and lawyers’; and those you must pay for, because they’re the only ones you ever want.’

‘How can you, Rebecca, be putting all those plates one on the top of another, with great dabs of butter sticking to the bottoms? You had better mind your own business.’

Rebecca pushed away the plates angrily.

‘If Mr. John had been minding his, he’d have come in to supper instead of collecting talk. Where might Miss Aylmer have been at the time of the death, Miss Lilly?’

‘At the Vicarage. And by what I can make out, Mr. John must have seen her home. It’s very odd. Dr. Lansdowne was with us. He must have known it, yet he never said a word about it.’

‘Ah ! Miss Lilly,’ said Rebecca oracularly. ‘You’ll see odder than that before you’re dead. I’ve something to tell you.’ Then putting down the dishes and shutting the door—

‘Miss Crotchet,’ she said, ‘you may be the singlest woman as ever was chosen, but some man will make up to you, if you’ve bank paper enough to curl your hair, be it ever so scanty.’

Miss Lilly considered both deficiencies in her own case, but failed to see the application. Rebecca, as usual, read her mistress’ thoughts.

‘No. It’s none of you I’m meaning. Not but what you’re single enough. It’s Miss Aylmer I have in my mind. As far as you’re concerned, we all know that your father lost his money down the sugar mines in the Indies,

and that your brother has got it back again at the coffee diggings. I was telling Nurse Weasel so the other day. She'll be sure to look in this evening, and then I'll mention to you what she happens to remark. We shall get at the wrongs and the insides of things in that way, I'm not one to be put off with outsides.'

'No, Rebecca. We all know by this time that you always hear double, and a very bad habit it is. While you're cocking your ears and wagging your tongue, the world goes on and leaves you behind it.'

'Now, Miss Lilly, as a lady you ought not to say such a thing. You know well enough, none better, that it isn't my ears or my tongue, or any other portion of my natural frame that has kept me down in this world, but my affection for the family. It's Mr. Rudge and Miss Aylmer, I was going to tell you about. Mrs. Weasel has passed the observation to me that the doctor has got an eye to her property.'

Miss Lilly suddenly remembered Mr. Rudge's manner towards the lady in the Vicarage garden.

‘She's soft enough to take him,’ she replied.

‘Soft, yes. She's butter for anybody's printing.’

‘Well, I should not grudge him a fortune. He's a good man,’ said Miss Lilly. ‘I wish others were more like him.’

‘Meaning Dr. Lansdowne, Miss Lilly? Miss Crotchet, do you happen to know where Mrs. Lansdowne is buried?’ Rebecca lowered her voice. ‘The question has been put to me this very day. Mrs. Rudge lies handy enough, poor soul, and glad by all accounts she was to get there; but I tell you truly, ma'am, it would be a satisfaction to my mind to see that other tomb. I'd thank anybody for that introduction.’

‘He may have had her only laid down under grass. Some prefer sods and wiring.’

‘Humph! I don't like it. Now Mr. Rudge.

let him be what he may, is widowed. There he stands, and there she lies. Mr. Timlings happened to call this afternoon while you were out. It's a funny thing. He said he'd heard I was ailing. I told him no such thing, and if I was I shouldn't pay for him, when I could have a guinea's worth of physician's advice for the asking. And so I could, Miss Lilly; I've only to stop Dr. Lansdowne at the scraper. Mr. Timlings had heard he was always at our door-bell, and he put this question to me: "Could I tell him, had my ladies ever heard any more of his wife or family? As they had introduced him, he said he hoped they were prepared to take all the consequences that came of it." "What's likely to come of it?" said I, "except that by all accounts many poor creatures will live a little longer, to be a burden to themselves and their families. No offence," I remarked. "That's the talk about him and you, Mr. Timlings." "Ah!" said he laughing, "there's more lies

told down at our place than in any other part of the parish; but come now," he said, "you ought to know all about Dr. Lansdowne, for it's to your house he's coming courting. Have all those stories," he said, "been cleared up, that got about when first he came?" "What stories?" said I, "my head had need to be a mine if I'm to remember all the lies I'm told." "Let us see," said he, "what was the name of the old doctor that sent him here? Dodds, wasn't it, Dodds of Bellingham, where your ladies came from?" "But he's dead," said I, "and past lying." "There's a Mrs. Dodds though, I suppose?" said he. "Yes," I said, "he'd left a widow in the old place. She might know something about the gentleman in question." "Ah!" said he, "your young lady'll be a fine match for him!" "Get along," said I. "It's a parcel of rubbish. He won't get a wife out of our house. The eldest Miss Crotchet," I said, "hates him like physie (which is no more than you do,

Miss Lilly) for his making a fuss about that bar." "Yes," said he, laughing. "I heard all about that. How the eldest Miss Crotchet turned him out and the youngest Miss Crotchet let him in! If he's physic to one, he may be sugar to the other. One man's salt's another's sugar."

'Hold your tongue, Rebecca!' exclaimed Miss Lilly, in deep indignation. 'I won't have such vulgarity talked to me. It's low! It's only fit for common people! I never heard such things said. Of course Dr. Lansdowne has not got a wife, or he would not be here without one; and if he had got one, what should he want with another? As to our niece, of course he would have asked our brother's leave to visit if there had been anything in that. That is how people do in our rank of life. I never heard such things said in our family in our father's time. Nobody ever told tales of us. Things are getting worse than ever!'

'I contradicted him, Miss Lilly. In and

out I contradicted him. If she had been my own daughter, I couldn't have been warmer. I know my duty to the family.'

'You don't,' said Miss Lilly in a temper. 'You are getting worse and worse. At this rate you'll not deserve a character soon.'

'Well, Miss Crotchet, there's one comfort,' said Rebecca, beginning to cry. 'We shall none of us want one to get to heaven. I shall be no worse off than yourself, for that. And if I was to go there now, I can say no more. I know as you've always been brought up very simple, and I can make allowance where allowance is due; but innocent as a babe at your time of life you cannot be. Your senses are all your own, which is more than most of your sisters can boast. Your wits are not failing you. If I was you I'd just drop a word of warning to the young lady herself. I've tried it, but she thinks nothing of me. And the next time you see the gentleman come smiling in, as if he was my lord of all, just

you turn the conversation on wives, dead and alive, and see if the corners of his mouth don't change. To be sure a wife is a loss easier made up than any other, but still the way he came about the place, without a single servant that had ever seen her or heard anything about her, and with two such mites of children, marks him "caution." That is all I say, and I say no more than others. Mind you this, Miss Lilly, the wicked will always prosper if the righteous aren't on the look-out to hinder them. Aren't we told in the Scriptures that the Psalmist cut them down like grass when he saw them flourishing, and then he understood their end! But you none of you read your Bibles; more is the pity! If we all of us was to keep our eyes shut, the world would spin round sinfuller and sinfuller. I've not that on my conscience, I'm thankful to say.'

'Mr. Timlings has stirred up all this,' reflected Miss Lilly. 'And Dr. Lansdowne has offered a hundred and fifty pounds only this

very day to be rid of him. And our stupid brother has put fifty to it. As Rebecca says, Dr. Lansdowne must be an evil man and have his motives. Augusta's a girl I can't speak to ; but I'll take care our brother knows my suspicions. Such things never happened at Bellingham Park.'

CHAPTER XVII.

THE EXPRESSION OF A SENTIMENT.

MISS AYLMER'S weak head was for a time completely turned by grief and the pride of possession. Her father's rule had always been strict. His estimate of the capacities of women in general, and of his own daughter in particular, had been very low ; consequently, the change was all the more startling. Her position had never been that of mistress in her father's house ; she had simply been an obedient, but unpaid and inefficient, housekeeper. Now, therefore, she was equally unable to estimate her own merits and the claims of those about her.

Until the day after the funeral, Mr. Rudge got no answer at all to his offer. It was

always, ‘Wait please, dear Mr. Rudge; I can’t think about anything but dying now.’

On the day of the funeral the Squire’s will was made known to his daughter, and on the following morning she despatched this letter:—

‘Dear Mr. Rudge,—I am, as you know, such a poor nervous creature, that I never can say beforehand what I shall be able to do. I cannot possibly give you a decided answer. You will understand it when I tell you that since dear papa was buried, I have been very much hurt by a letter from Mr. Bolton Crotchet, in which he reminds me that our lease is up at Michaelmas, and says that he intends to occupy this house himself. How hard his nature must be! His son is very different. He brought the note; and he said that if he were his father, I should never go away. All this made me very ill, and although you were good enough to say that my health should be your first consideration, yet,

under the peculiar circumstances, I thought it the correctest thing to send for Dr. Lansdowne. He is here now. How thankful I ought to be that I am not a poor woman, dependent on kind friends to offer me a home. Indeed, it is my only comfort to think of the touching confidence expressed in me by my dear father's will, though he never happened to mention it before. This makes me feel that I must always take care of all that he has bequeathed to me, for his sake ; and must look after it myself as well as my feeble powers allow. I feel sure that this was his meaning ; but I am very sensible of the kindness of your offers of help and counsel.

‘ I have desired a couple of rabbits to be sent down to you. Please accept them, for on the very last day my dear father was alive, though he could not talk much, he said, mentioning your name, “ Rabbits for Rudge.”

‘ So touching his gratitude was. I hear that dreadful Mr. Bolton Crotchet is to be

elected in his place on the Dispensary Board. They might have spared me this ; but no one knows an orphan's feelings.

‘ Some day, dear Mr. Rudge, I may be able to see the contents of your letter in rather a different light, but meanwhile I must sign myself,

‘ Yours, the same as before,

‘ ADELINE AYLMER.’

Such a letter could only be as distasteful as one of his own most noxious draughts to Mr. Rudge. Every ingredient likely to disgust him seemed to have been infused into it.

He was to ‘ wait,’ at his time of life, until the sense of property palled upon Miss Aylmer, or until more desirable admirers had failed. ‘ Wait,’ indeed ! Would his infirmities wait for her vanities ? Dr. Lansdowne was in the house. John Crotchet was regarded with favour. It was clear that she was not going to put up with an elderly husband, if she could

get a younger one. Meanwhile she begged his acceptance of—a couple of rabbits! Rabbits, in a county where every cottar's wife can have her potfull without saying grace. It was too much! And yet, as ill luck would have it, it was not nearly all.

Errands to the doctor's were not popular with the late Squire's servants. In the days when Mr. Aylmer sent him game, Mr. Rudge had never been found to show a proper appreciation of the bearer's interest in the gift. What, therefore, was it likely to be now? The job would be as little productive as pleasant. It was therefore deputed to James Clackett, the odd boy.

Now Jimmy had an objection to losing the use of his hands in anybody's service; he therefore carried Miss Aylmer's note in his mouth when he didn't want to eat blackberries, and stuck it in his cap when he did. The two rabbits he tied together and slung round his neck. Moreover, they were rabbits without their skins!

Miss Aylmer herself would have been greatly shocked at such a piece of impertinence had she seen it ; but, in the cultivation of her elegant sentiments, she was unfortunately apt to overlook the vulgar details of their expression.

No one had thought it decorous to go out shooting over the Squire's domain whilst he lay dead in the house. When, therefore, Miss Aylmer vaguely ordered 'rabbits' to be sent to Mr. Rudge's, there were none that were freshly killed. It had, however, been summarily decided in the lower regions of the house that two of 'a lot that were ready for boiling down had best go, and say nothing about it.' Mr. Rudge wouldn't want the skins. He wouldn't see them. No one but his cook need complain, and she was despised in the Squire's kitchen.

It may be doubted whether two dead cats, soft and furry, would not have expressed more agreeable sentiments than those two raw rabbits. It was a pity that Miss Aylmer

forgot what strange forms sentiment can take when it depends for its material clothing upon unsympathetic fingers.

Dressed in his neatest clothes, clean and smooth, with his memoranda in his pocket, and his speech in favour of Mr. Timlings and against Dr. Lansdowne in his careful head, Mr. Rudge was just descending his own door-steps on his way to the meeting at the Dispensary, when, as ill luck would have it, he encountered the boy.

‘Be off! D’ye hear!’ said Mr. Rudge, taking the soiled letter between the tips of his fingers, and glancing angrily at its contents. ‘There’s no answer; none.’

But Jimmy, removing his cap, and slowly ducking his head, passed the red carcasses over it, and held them out to Mr. Rudge.

For a moment Mr. Rudge heard nothing, thought nothing, was no longer angry. All the machinery of his body went out of gear; all his blood seemed to stand still in his veins,

and then to flow back again with the utmost violence the wrong way.

Like everything else, to know how to be angry, well and safely, you must be accustomed to the occasional exercise of the passion ; but Mr. Rudge was not used to its active display. It came upon him all unawares, in the form of blind, unreasoning fury, causing him to exhibit the conditions under which murder is done. Such is the way with these phlegmatic men.

‘Be off! boy!’ he once more shouted. Then, if wishes loud and outspoken could have sent James Clackett where he would never have run errands any more, he would have descended there faster than his legs ever carried him. Nor would he have gone alone ; for Miss Aylmer herself would have been not far behind him.

Mr. Rudge, the churchwarden, cursing and swearing in the public streets as if he had been James’ own father ! It had an odd effect upon

the boy. He started off a pace or two with an instinct of self-preservation, not always uncalled for under similar circumstances in his social circle. Then he flung the rabbits into the dirt in the middle of the road, and poising in his hand a sharp bit of wood, which he had whittled away as he came, he pointed it straight at Mr. Rudge's head.

‘Just you come on, and I’ll tip this here cat into your eyes! I didn’t thief ’em. We ain’t been snaring nor yet doing nothing. Father’s been abed every night this fortnight, and us went to the Squire’s funeral all respectable. I tell you they’re for you. Miss sent ’em. You can take ’em. There they lies.’

In thus speaking, Jimmy answered what he took to be Mr. Rudge’s only possible objection to his burden. His father was the worst enemy to the preserves of the upper classes that Shellford contained. He was the worst drunkard also. His mother was a chronic suf-

ferer whose case Dr. Lansdowne had taken up. Accordingly Jimmy, well-behaved enough at times, but now turned a rebel by fear, went on thus—

‘Mother, she says, she don’t value the parish a farthen now. She says as the best doctors don’t come out o’ church.’

Mr. Rudge raised a strong walking-stick.

This was enough for Jimmy. The world for him was roughly divided into those whose threats meant execution, and those in whose mouths they had no further significance. In the former class were squires, parsons, policemen, beadles, butlers, and so on, generally all who wore broadcloth or liveries. In the latter were his own mother and all his particular chums.

Now Mr. Rudge certainly belonged to the former class. The boy, therefore, at sight of the stick, dropped his air of defiance together with his pointed ‘cat,’ and took to his heels, to save his precious soul and his yet more

valuable body from the evils with which Mr. Rudge was threatening them.

But Mr. Rudge said no more. He only stood quite still and gasped for breath. He was almost interested to find that he knew so many bad words and could combine them so strikingly. Then he shook himself, turned deadly pale, and fumbling for his latch-key, re-entered the house.

‘Who got father locked up for doing a good turn to Squire Aylmer’s keeper?’ sang out the boy as soon as he saw the enemy’s back.

Mr. Rudge took off his hat and gloves, and sat down mechanically in his consulting chair. He felt very cold, although it was a hot day. Once more getting up, he opened a very familiar cupboard, and drank off a large dose of brandy. He was surprised to observe how his hands shook.

He was conscious enough now of all that had happened, but he could not yet trust himself to think of it in detail. He sat rooted to

the spot, his eyes fixed upon the yellow rows of dots in the old-fashioned oilcloth table-cover. He counted them backwards and forwards, and drew the drops of brandy he had spilt into long lines with his fingers.

Slowly the clock pointed to ten minutes to three; and at three he was due at the Dispensary. It was always his custom to be sitting in his place when the other members arrived. The brandy warmed him, and presently he pulled out the offending letter, and with considerable self-control read it all through, down to 'Yours the same as before.' Now Miss Aylmer had been particularly pleased with this ending. She thought it original, expressive, and appropriate. She wondered that nobody had ever invented it sooner, and she determined to use it to several people; but when Mr. Rudge came to it he lighted a match and burnt the letter to ashes.

He had made Miss Aylmer an offer of himself, as husband, counsellor, and physician, and

she had sent him a letter which was tantamount to a refusal of him upon all counts, accompanying the rejection, as he believed, with gross personal insult.

Mr. Rudge was accustomed to value himself exceedingly upon externals, and to demand from others answering demonstrations of respect for his outer man. Beneath a smooth and guarded exterior, the innate coarseness of his nature made him all the more ready to detect vulgarity in others. Had he been only a little more of a gentleman he could better have afforded to see the thing as it really was. He might even have been able to treat it as a joke, though a bad one. But then he was not a gentleman, and externals were everything to him. He was wounded in the tenderest part, namely in his own self-esteem, and was lowered, it might also be, in the eyes of others, by Miss Aylmer's mode of conveying her decision to him, and by its consequences upon his own temper.

Yet Miss Aylmer had not meant to repulse, far less to insult, him. She thought, when writing, that it was quite possible she might at some future day condescend to marry him. But she was in no mood to abandon her kingdom as yet, or to relinquish superior chances. All this was quite apparent to him when he re-read the letter.

Meanwhile a limping figure came along, clad in patched and disreputable garments. It stumbled over the rejected rabbits in the middle of the road, and exclaimed—

‘Skinned cats! Skinned cats! Oh! them boys! You rascals, I’ll tell yer mothers, as sure as my name’s Sudds.’

Mrs. Sudds’ threats being of the ineffectual sort, were received by Jimmy Clackett and a friend of his with shouts of derision. They were watching events from a safe distance. ‘Old Sally! Silly Sally! Aunt Sally!’ they cried, as they made off. The old woman stooping to examine the prey, muttered,

‘Holy Elijah! They’re peeled rabbits. It’s a particular Providence. The same as fed the blessed ravens with manna from the skies.’

Then, seeing no one watching her, she tucked the stiffened corpses beneath her shawl, and in her turn hobbled away as fast as two uneven legs would carry her, and those ill-omened rabbits were seen no more.

From the window of his dark room Mr. Rudge saw her depart, and was thankful. The evident tokens of his disgrace were done away with. Yet this was small comfort, for he knew that behind twenty wire-blinds, similar to his own, in the double row of houses facing the street, as many curious eyes might have witnessed the strange scene.

It now remained for him to wipe out the yet more indelible personal affront, or to revenge it. How was it to be done? For five minutes yet he stood still by the window, but when a clock broke silence by warning the hour, he seized his hat and stick, and once

more started for the Dispensary. He had pretty well decided what to do when he got there ; but he had not decided what course to take should he meet Jimmy Clackett. Henceforth that unimportant urchin held Mr. Rudge in ignominious bondage.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MOVE.

MR. RUDGE arrived at the Dispensary, for the first time, five minutes late. In the ante-room he found Mr. Bolton Crotchet. That gentleman received him with embarrassment. He remembered that Mr. Rudge's share in the proceedings at the Vicarage and his own had not been in harmony.

Mr. Bolton Crotchet saw in Mr. Rudge a probable opponent, whom he must humour by patronage.

‘ Good morning, Doctor. I am, I believe, to be elected this afternoon to fill the vacant place upon your Board. Perhaps you can

inform me, sir, if I am in order in remaining where I am until I have been duly nominated and accepted?’

‘Quite right, Mr. Crotchet. I regret that my unusual unpunctuality should have delayed your entrance; but that will be remedied immediately. You will allow me to say, sir, that it is a subject of congratulation to most of us to have so active and influential a member amongst us: one who will take a leading part in all that concerns our parish. The late Mr. Aylmer knew nothing of business; nothing whatever. He cared for nothing but his game and his cellar.’

‘You don’t say so?’

‘I do, sir.’

‘Well, I am going,’ said Mr. Crotchet, ‘to take the property into my own hands now. Have you any idea of the state of the wine-cellar, Mr. Rudge? I believe there was some rare old port laid down in that cellar in my father’s time. One likes to oblige an unfor-

tunate lady. I shouldn't mind taking the whole concern off Miss Aylmer's hands.'

'Mr. Aylmer has left the best cellar-book, sir, in the whole of the Eastern Counties. He was very proud of it too. Every entry is in his own handwriting since Mr. Hobbes Crotchet's own time. He kept the key of the cellar, sir, under his pillow till he died. I've known him on Christmas Day, or special occasions, with a few of us who knew what was what, pass that book round with the wine. I can assure you, Mr. Crotchet, it was a privilege even to read it. A treat to look at the figures.'

The subject warmed Mr. Rudge into momentary self-forgetfulness. The next question effectually cooled his ardour.

'And about the daughter now, Mr. Rudge. What sort of a person is she? I'm sorry to dispossess her; but you've plenty of houses in Shellford suitable for a single lady.'

Mr. Rudge felt just then that the Poor

House was 'suitable' enough for that 'single lady,' and that he would see her on her road to it with pleasure, notwithstanding that he had so lately offered her the accommodation of his own dwelling.

'She is a woman, Mr. Crotchet, who will water her port. Port of '40. And who is as likely as not to carry it away in her band-boxes because it belonged to her dear papa.'

Mr. Crotchet shuddered. He was most anxious to prove himself a good country gentleman, such as his father had been. His interest in Mr. Aylmer's cellar was the result of this desire rather than of any genuine taste. He had in truth forgotten port wine in the West Indies; but now he meant to know all about it again.

'If you want to get the whole concern into your own hands you should lose no time about it, Mr. Crotchet. I must say it is what we should all wish, to have you and your family established in the old place.'

‘You’re very obliging, I’m sure; but I suppose the lady must be given a little time to collect her ideas?’

‘It will not take her long to do that, Mr. Crotchet.’

‘Ah! I perceive you’ve been to school to my sister Elizabeth, Doctor!’ She says the lady in question has but “one idea and no change.”’

Mr. Crotchet was rather surprised at all this talkativeness and cordiality on Mr. Rudge’s part; but he found no difficulty in accounting for the loquacity by a suspicious unsteadiness, which suggested brandy. As to the cordiality, that might even more easily be accounted for by a professional desire to stand well with the chief man in the place.

‘About that affair of Timlings, Squire. A word in your ear.’

‘Hullo! Squire already!’ thought Mr. Crotchet.

‘That was a most excellent speech that you

made us the other day, though you did thump me and my good friend Mortimer rather hard. But you were right, sir ; you were right. If ever I find that I've been mistaken in my judgment upon any point, I'm the first to acknowledge it.'

'Does you credit, I'm sure,' said Mr. Crotchet, puzzled.

He felt quite penitent for having taken his own course in a matter of no consequence really to himself, but probably of very great importance to this worthy Doctor.

'Upon further consideration, since the question was raised among us, you need anticipate no further objection on my part, Mr. Crotchet, to young Timlings' departure. No doubt he will see that it is to his interest to accept the liberal offer made to him by Lansdowne and yourself. It will be a great loss to myself ; that I don't deny ; but I have come to the conclusion that I should not be justified in standing in the young fellow's light.

Not to be outdone in generosity, the other replied—

‘But I am open to conviction, Mr. Rudge. I’m open to conviction. You’ve only to convert me, all of you in there, and I’ll put down my 50*l.* for young “What’s-his-name” to lay out in teaspoons. My object is merely to encourage merit in whatever may be the most effective form.’

‘Sir! You shall have no further trouble in the matter.’

So saying, Mr. Rudge bowed himself through the green baize door, leaving Mr. Crotchet more surprised than ever.

Did nobody in Shellford know their own minds, except ‘the four Q.’s in a corner?’ as Bolton called his queer sisters.

The proceedings of the meeting were briefly as follows:—

1. Vote of condolence to Miss Aylmer.
2. Mr. Bolton Crotchet’s election and entry.
3. Mr. Timlings’ resignation laid upon the table by the Chairman.

4. Motion by Dr. Lansdowne ‘(a) to accept the resignation ; (b) to appoint a regularly qualified practitioner ; (c) to raise the stipend.’

They got on pretty well till they came to No. 3.

Nobody objected to condoling with Miss Aylmer, except Mr. Rudge, and he made a mental reservation with regard to No. 1, and so arrived at No. 2, which was Mr. Bolton Crotchet’s election. There he voted straight.

At No 3, they all stood at attention.

Mr. Timlings wished, not only to resign the Dispensary, but also to leave Shellford-by-Shore. He had not dreamt of such a complete change, when first he proposed to resign ; but for that 200*l.* down in ready money, which he had heard of and hoped to see, where would he not have gone? Dr. Lansdowne and Mr. Bolton Crotchet’s offer had set before him a chance of a fresh start, such as he might never meet with again, in his life of two and sixpenny fees. Another fund had indeed been mentioned, ‘to

raise his salary if he staid,' but as it stuck at fifty pounds, what doubt could there be, in the mind of a young man who wished well to himself?

So eager, indeed, was Mr. Timlings to qualify for the 200*l.*, that he had already gone up to London, on some errand connected with his own advancement. He returned mysterious and triumphant, darkly hinting at a plot for somebody else's destruction, which would, he told his mother, 'begin to happen at the Dispensary Meeting.' Guy Fawkes was Mr. Timlings' most admired character in English History.

However, the meeting got to No. 3, without any smell of powder. There, however, they halted.

Mr. Mortimer's mind had not kept pace with the changes either in Mr. Timlings' or Mr. Rudge's. He was chairman, and he began to argue in the old way in favour of retaining Mr. Timlings. What was his amazement when up rose his churchwarden—

‘Excuse me, Mr. chairman—gentlemen. I am aware that I am possibly out of order.’

‘Quite out of order,’ said Dr. Lansdowne.

‘We will waive the objection in consideration of Mr. Rudge’s claims upon the Board’—said the chairman. Dr. Lansdowne sat down, but kept his watch in his hand counting each word of Mr. Rudge’s, as if it had been a pulse.

‘In the event of Mr. Timlings’ resignation being accepted, I beg to state that I intend to resume the duties of the Dispensary myself. Those duties were only undertaken by him, in the first instance, as my assistant. I have yet to learn that in their fulfilment he has given cause for dissatisfaction to anyone. But although my time is very valuable’ (here he glanced at Dr. Lansdowne), ‘I am prepared, I may say gladly prepared, to make any sacrifice which may be considered for the good of my poorer brethren! In their cause, gentlemen, you will ever find me second to *none*!’

‘Check to you, Lansdowne,’ said Mr. Crotchet aside.

‘Hear ! Hear ! Well done !’ cried the vicar, forgetting the duties of a chairman in those of a friend.

‘Does him honour, I’m sure,’ said the new member, thumping the floor with his stick—then, aside,

‘Now, Lansdowne, up with your motion for raising the pay of the post. We’ll vote it all to a man, and go home and be happy. The rest of your notice is knocked off, you perceive. (a) We accept the resignation. (b) We appoint the properly qualified. (c) We raise the pay. Now for it. Quick ! Your vicar isn’t half alive. Put me in the chair, and you should all have been a mile away by now.’

For a man whose wishes are presumably about to be accomplished, Dr. Lansdowne looked unaccountably annoyed.

The meeting went on to declare Mr. Rudge invested with the duties of an office which it

now for the first time recollected he had never resigned, and it passed Dr. Lansdowne's motion (*c*) without his ever putting it. Mr. Rudge should be properly paid, oh! yes; 'Duty should not be its own reward.'

They got up to go. Surely it was all finished. 'Just a question. Informal only.' Would they advise Mr. Mortimer 'what to do with the 50l.?' That fifty that Mr. Timlings was to have had if he had staid. 'He was going to London.' He had begged Mr. Mortimer 'to mention it, to all whom it might concern, at that meeting—

'He was about to enter into business with an old-established chemist of the name of Bannister, in Worcester Street, Strand!'

Well, there was nothing in that. Yet Dr. Lansdowne's watch fell through his fingers on to the deal table. The glass broke, and it took him five minutes to collect the pieces.

When next Dr. Lansdowne looked up, Mr. Rudge, with a glow of modest satisfaction upon

his face, was proposing to add the 50*l.* to the 200*l.*, for Mr. Timlings' benefit, 'to put it all together and let the young man have it, to set him up in Worcester Street.'

No meeting ever felt better, happier, or more free of its difficulties. But stop a minute, one member demurs. Dr. Lansdowne 'denies the right of the Committee to control, restrain, or deal with, the application of that sum of 200*l.*' The question of its disposal lay, he declared, 'entirely outside the province of that Board.'

Now the meeting did not like this. It had never been accustomed to be a very correct body in matters of form. It was rather one given to gossip, and to thrusting its thumbs and fingers into any business it saw lying handy. Since Dr. Lansdowne had become a member of it, he was always giving it lessons, and it resented them. It did not like having limits arbitrarily assigned to the scope of its inquiries. It did not like *him*, in fact, and the disapproval was known to be mutual.

Mr. Mortimer came to the front on this occasion, with the inevitable compromise.

The money, 250*l.* in full, was to be handed over to Mr. Bolton Crotchet, to be by him laid out 'for Mr. Timlings' benefit, subject to the approval, individual and collective, of Dr. Lansdowne, Mr. Rudge, and Mr. Mortimer, as the highest contributors.' To the donor of 150*l.* this was only a reasonable concession. The meeting then broke up, with a sense of having been more important than ever.

Mr. Timlings that evening gave his mother to understand by expressive pantomime that he had been drawing somebody's teeth during the day. Considering how common such performances at the Dispensary were, Mrs. Timlings rather wondered at his mentioning such a vulgar fact.

CHAPTER XIX.

ENEMIES.

‘WHITHER away, Rudge?’ cried the vicar, after the meeting, disappointed in not sauntering home, as usual, arm in arm with his friend.

‘Squire’s House, to visit Miss Aylmer, Mr. Mortimer. Haven’t time for a word.’

‘A public-spirited sort of man, that,’ observed Mr. Bolton Crotchet. ‘Not many men at his time of life would take to parish drudgery again, ill paid as it is.’

‘As it *was*!’ interposed Dr. Lansdowne drily.

‘Ah! you’re there, Lansdowne, are you? I want a word with you about Mr. Timlings’ pecuniary affairs. I don’t mind owning to

you that I am disposed to entertain a much higher opinion of Rudge than I did before. I don't know how it strikes you; but it seems to me that he has come out of this business uncommonly well. My sister Elizabeth will be pleased to hear it. She has always stood up for him. Elizabeth is firm. She sticks to her crotchets. "Je m'accroche aux crochets," you know: "I adhere to my crotchets." Liberal translation of our family motto. Crest, an old bear, holding on! Ha! ha! That's how my father climbed to the top of the tree.

'About Timlings now. As you're the originator, and by far the largest contributor to the fund, I should be glad to elicit your wishes. You'd approve of a premium, I suppose, to push him into some good concern? "Ban-nister's," didn't the chairman say, near the Strand? Really, it was very sharp of you, Lansdowne, to settle them all with that unexpected trump. Positively, in all my wide colonial experience I don't know that I ever

met with a precisely similar case before. But you're right; you may take my word for it, you're right; from your own point of view, of course. Why, it's my belief there wasn't a creature upon that lawn understood your play, except myself.'

'I fear it is my turn not to understand you now, Mr. Crotchet.'

Mr. Crotchet seemed much tickled by this observation.

'To business, Lansdowne, to business,' he said, recovering himself; 'since you're so interested in pushing Timlings' fortunes.'

'To tell the truth, Mr. Crotchet, Mr. Timlings' medical education appears to me to be the first consideration.'

'Well, well! It's all the same thing. You pay for his education, and his education is his fortune. I grant you it's the best way of doing his business, and your own too.'

'Before expending this money, Mr. Crotchet, I propose to make it a *sine quâ non* that the

post which it opens up for him shall be one which he is absolutely qualified to fill.'

'Well! What's against Bannister's? I take it he'll only be a sort of superior shop-boy there. You know more of such matters than I do; but I suppose he'll only dispense the drugs, and deal with the teeth in the back parlour. Can't you even let him do that? It won't be either yours or mine that he'll draw.'

'Though from your sour looks it might be! A plague upon the cantankerous fellow! if he isn't going to haggle over pay-day, after all,' thought Bolton Crotchet.

'There are certain inquiries, Mr. Crotchet, which I must make, before I can give you any definite answer. I must take a few days to consider the matter. Then I will let you know my decision.'

So saying, Lansdowne turned off by himself along the Terrace, looking as gloomy as if for him, too, as well as for Mr. Rudge, Jimmy Clackett lurked behind every lamp-post.

Mr. Crotchet's cheerful optimism was clouded for a moment by Dr. Lansdowne's unsympathetic reception of his views. He speedily recovered, however, in the healthy glow, both moral and physical, resulting from having asserted himself, and from having uttered his opinions with decision. He went in to discuss matters with Miss Lilly, and to his surprise found her waiting for him. She, too, had something presently to communicate.

Shellford-by-Shore possessed a dingy jetty. Its black tarred piles ran out into the sea for a couple of hundred feet at high tide ; but at low water it stood bare, displaying the mussel shells and green weeds which covered its simple structure. At the further extremity of this jetty, on a strip of fine sand, left by the receding tide, Dr. Lansdowne saw his own children at play.

Crunching down over the shingle, he went to join them ; but paused, attracted by another figure. It was that of a girl leaning against

one of the buttresses, in a line of shade cast from the overhanging beams.

She did not hear him coming. A book lay in her lap, but she was not reading. Both hands were clasped together behind her head to protect her hair from the rough woodwork. She was watching the children, but her thoughts were evidently far away.

Unwilling to disturb so pretty a picture, yet believing himself sure of a welcome, Dr. Lansdowne went up to her.

Augusta Crotchet started, and for the first time looked decidedly troubled at the sight of him. Two tiny wrinkles grew upon her forehead, and she did not offer her hand.

‘Where is my father?’ she asked. ‘Is the meeting over? He must have forgotten that I promised to wait for him here. But he does hate walking so.’

Lansdowne made the necessary replies briefly enough.

She turned, noticing his manner.

‘Well, will you not tell me about the meeting, then? Has it all gone wrong, and is Mr. Timlings going to stay for ever, and be a comfort to Mr. Rudge?’

‘On the contrary, Mr. Timlings is, I believe, leaving at once. But all the same for that, the affair did go all wrong. I am coming to the conclusion that it is I who had better take myself off, and leave Mr. Rudge to be a blessing to the place.’

‘It is odd,’ she said quietly, ‘how much some people mind when they don’t get their own way; and how much more some others mind when they do.’

‘That, if I may be allowed to say it, is an enigmatical utterance, worthy of your brother himself.’

‘I was merely thinking of things in general,’ she said, colouring.

‘May I venture to suppose myself included in that vague category? If so, do not suspect me of private pique, I entreat you. My sym-

pathies are hardly so susceptible to personal influences. I could, I assure you, overlook many causes of personal annoyance which would let out the savage from beneath Mr. Rudge's careful exterior.'

He spoke half in jest ; but she answered coldly,

'The subject needs no further discussion. I am quite aware that you wish me to understand that the good of the people, the progress of medicine, and so on, are your chief considerations in opposing Mr. Rudge and Mr. Timlings ; that if you are annoyed, it is upon public grounds. I should be glad,' she added quickly, 'if I could dignify my own states of weariness and vexation by assigning them to such grand causes ; but I fear that society seldom permits such consolations to women.'

He felt the sarcasm. It stung him by its novelty. How long had she learnt such thoughts ? The man was sore and harassed.

His jealous ears were alert to detect doubt and misgiving everywhere. To his exaggerated sensitiveness, suspicion appeared to meet him where he had least looked for it, and to speak to him by the lips of the very girl in whose estimation he had most desired to be enthroned above its reach.

‘Do you mean to tell me, Miss Crotchet, in so many words that I am deceiving myself and you?’

This speech naturally made matters worse. She saw that he had lost his temper, without seeing the depth of feeling which almost excused it.

Without replying to his question, she bowed slightly, and wishing him ‘good-bye,’ turned away.

Penitence and shame come so easily at the bidding of such sweet monitors. When Augusta Crotchet reproved he found contrition very pleasant. ‘Do not go,’ he entreated, stretching out both hands to detain her. ‘Stay only another

moment. I was wrong. You were right. It sounds absurd to say that I do care for myself a very long way before any of the inhabitants of any of the cottages in Shellford.' (So long as she was an inhabitant of Shellford this was all he would confess.) 'But you promised to let me explain myself.'

'Conditionally. And I do not see any present necessity.'

Surely it was not in his imagination only that a change had come over her? To let her go like this would be to lose his pleasant intercourse with her for ever. He made another effort to restore her almost childlike trustfulness of manner.

'Will you not tell me instead, then, to what do you attribute your——'

'Discordant moods? Well, partly to the loss of my old home in Jamaica. Not our house in the city, but the villa in the country, near the plantations, St. Cecilia's. It was such a lovely spot, and the beauty of it had become

quite a part of all my plans for the future, as well as of my enjoyment in the present. I do not like this colourless land. The very metaphors which its inhabitants borrow for its uncomfortable climate are miserable. The waters “sob” and “moan,” or, at least, “murmur.” The winds “sigh” and “wail,” or even “howl.” The clouds “weep.”’

Lansdowne laughed.

‘So these were your cheerful thoughts when I disturbed you! Pray did the elements do none of these disagreeable things at St. Cecilia’s?’

‘I only recollect that the waters “laughed” and “danced.” The winds “sang.” The clouds—well, I remember nothing about the clouds, I only remember the sunshine.’

‘Yet to go back again would probably be no remedy. These changes are in ourselves. It is the crying of our own hearts, which first teaches us to detect the minor chord in the voices of nature or of other men.’

She did not answer, and the children came running up. They had a basket of shells and sea-treasures.

‘ Papa ! ’ exclaimed Algernon, ‘ look ! Here are angels’ eggs, and here are their feathers. The baby ones come out of these eggs, and when they get big enough they fly away to where the sky comes down into the sea, and go up there to live. Humphrey Mortimer’s seen them.’

‘ I greatly fear that Master Humbug’s “angels” were simply “gulls” glorified, my boy.’

This interruption brought merriment and freedom from restraint. They began their ascent of the shingle together. The children chattering as they went.

Several flights of steps cut in the rocks led up from the shore to the top of the cliffs, where stood the Terrace houses. Dr. Lansdowne and Augusta had got half-way up these stone stairs, the children scrambling on before, when a man appeared, descending.

‘Who is it?’ asked Augusta.

‘Timlings,’ answered Lansdowne, in deep disgust. ‘Timlings and his invariable photographic apparatus. He is a dabbler in photography. He makes rather a good thing of his views, I believe. You know, the beauties of Shellford, as you see them in the toy-shop windows; they are his.’

The young man came on, carrying his photographic stand with a free and easy air, which gave a rakish look, even to the legs of the camera, as they stuck out behind him. He wore a light costume, of the kind advertised in America as a ‘Beach-get-up,’ and nearer home as ‘The Margate suit.’ But at all ages and under all circumstances, it was by his head of hair that Mr. Timlings was invariably known and described.

Those who, to use his own expression, were ‘partial to him,’ admired it vastly. Certain young ladies of his set had even declared that it reminded them of ‘those dear little pic-

tures of cherubs, which you see in foreign churches.' Others, who were less attracted by his individuality, remarked, on the contrary, that it suggested 'snakes,' and made them 'creep,' and borrowing from heathen, instead of Christian mythology, were heard to allude to Medusa.

The stone steps upon which this individual met the ascending party were narrow. So narrow that persons could pass only singly. Mr. Timlings let the children go by, hoisting his camera over their heads, but there was that in his manner as he came face to face with Lansdowne and Augusta which made that gentleman say—

'Pray don't move, Miss Crotchet. Let him pass outside.' But to 'pass outside,' or indeed to pass at all, was what apparently Mr. Timlings had no mind to do. The black cloth covering of his stand flapped against Augusta Crotchet's dress, but he took no notice of the fact. He planted himself straight in Dr. Lans-

downe's way, so that he could not advance a step. Then with the air of a man demanding rather than asking a favour, said—

‘Dr. Lansdowne, I should be glad to know if it will suit you to give me five minutes’ conversation, or are you better engaged?’

‘I shall be obliged to you if you will *write* anything you may have to say to me, Mr. Timlings. At present I cannot attend to you. Allow us to pass.’

‘Can’t the young lady spare you, even for five minutes?’ asked Mr. Timlings with an unpleasant sneer.

Augusta turned pale, and involuntarily advanced a step. Then in obedience to an authoritative sign from Dr. Lansdowne, staid where she was and faced the fellow. It would be well, Dr. Lansdowne felt, to give his accompanying her as public and unimportant an air as possible. A girl of thinner nature would, by departing in confusion, have sanctioned

Mr. Timlings' innuendoes. Augusta was at once too single-minded and too proud to be moved to any different course of action by such an event as this.

Moved by a generous impulse, she stood her ground, for Dr. Lansdowne's sake, as well as her own, and was thanked by a momentary glance, marking at once Dr. Lansdowne's comprehension and his gratitude.

‘So you wish me to speak before the young lady? I’ve no objection. It’s a little family matter, yours not mine, that I should have thought you’d have preferred to discuss in private; but if it’s the same to you, it’s agreeable to me. I’m not ashamed to say anything I’ve got to say. *I’ve* never done anything I need blush for.’

‘If you’re not ashamed of your present conduct, Mr. Timlings, I have only to say that any *gentleman* would be! Allow this lady to pass.’

For answer Mr. Timlings rested his camera so as to block the steps.

For a moment Dr. Lansdowne hesitated. The colour grew, up to the roots of his hair. Mr. Timlings framed his lips for a careless whistle. The next moment the photographic stand was flying to the bottom of the cliffs.

Its aggressive legs were broken short off in its fall, its framework and glasses smashed, its black cloth, caught by a projecting point, waved like a funereal flag over the ruin. Then extending an arm to protect Augusta Crotchet, Dr. Lansdowne put her in safety past Mr. Timlings before the young man had recovered the shock.

Now to Mr. Timlings this camera was at least as dear as an old and faithful dog. He had bought it years before out of very narrow savings. He had altered and improved it, with much expenditure of time and trouble, to suit his own peculiar methods. He had been successful with it. Moreover, it was intimately associated with his own personality. With it,

he was a complete being ; without it, a solitary and enraged atom.

No broken limb that he had ever bandaged had caused him half the sympathetic suffering he now endured, at sight of this thing's mutilated sticks.

‘Who breaks pays,’ said Dr. Lansdowne coolly. ‘My hundred and fifty pounds will buy you a better.’

‘It may buy me a better, but it will not buy my silence, which, I take it, was the meaning of your offer,’ retorted the other, turning upon him.

‘Let me pass, or you follow it,’ said Lansdowne, seeing the threatening attitude.

In telling the story afterwards Mr. Timlings did wondrous things, keeping his enemy prisoner for full twenty minutes longer, in fear of his life, whilst Miss Crotchet was noting, in spite of herself, which was the best man of the two. But as it happened on the face of the cliff and not in his mother’s parlour,

he made no further difficulty about the matter, contenting himself by shouting after them as they reached the top of the steps,

‘I’ll write what I have to say to the young lady herself, after this.’

CHAPTER XX.

FRIENDS.

For a short distance Dr. Lansdowne and Augusta proceeded in silence. She was trembling visibly, and he drew her hand within his arm, fearing all the while lest they should meet the four aunts and ‘Gin,’ out for their afternoon turn, before she could have recovered herself sufficiently to listen to what he had to say.

A convenient bench offered itself, and quickly withdrawing her hand, she rested upon it for a moment.

‘What does it all mean?’ she asked as soon as she could speak. ‘Did that man intend to insult you, or me? And why? It is

disgraceful. My father must hear of such conduct.'

'I am humiliated beyond expression, Miss Crotchet, that this should have happened to you in my society. It was for my sake that you have been insulted; but I can assure you that you shall hear no more of it. I shall take measures. The fellow is a low cur. He owes me a grudge for opposing him. He fancies that he has made some discovery to my discredit, and he is using it as you have seen.—Miss Crotchet, will you allow me to tell you that which shall hinder anyone else, having the power to write or to speak to you upon the subject in future? I have only been restrained, hitherto, by the fear of widening the distance between us, but the necessity seems forcing itself upon me.'

'No! no. Not now. I am shaken. I cannot attend. I do not wish to hear anything about those past troubles of yours, to which you are constantly alluding. Can you not let

them rest? They frighten me. I can do nothing to help you. If you want a friend, can you not talk to my father and take his advice? People often consulted him in Jamaica.'

Lansdowne winced at the remedy. Yet she evidently spoke in simple faith.

'I do want a friend,' he answered. 'And I have been foolish enough to dream that you yourself might come to be my friend. No one else could help me as you could.'

'How?' she asked.

'By believing in me, in spite of things which you may hear said against me, almost, if it were possible, as I believe in you. By permitting me to be your friend. You too need the sympathy of some one nearer your own age. Your aunts' disappointed existence oppresses you. Your brother has his own interests. One's position with regard to one's father alters as one advances in life. Surely we might both be the happier for such a friend-

ship as I have ventured to think we might have?’

A week ago, he knew she would have answered, ‘Yes,’ readily enough. Now she turned away and said evasively—

‘It is a sister that I want. I wish I had a sister of my own.’

She was startled at the effect of this simple remark.

‘No! No! Do not say that,’ he exclaimed. ‘You do not know what you are wishing. With the picture of your old aunts before you, you cannot really desire such a thing. See what it has come to in their case. Companionship, with no variety of interests or ideas. Intimacy, with no respect. Similarity, with no attraction to preserve it from disgust.’

‘What makes you say all this?’ she asked, surprised. ‘Had you ever any sisters?’

‘None; or brothers either. It’s a weak point of mine. But, Miss Crotchet, you will not answer my question. Is it really possible

that anything which such a creature as that Timlings can say, can influence you against me? If so, would it not be merely justice to give me an opportunity of setting myself right in your eyes, if that were possible?’

If the words were cold, the manner expressed an exceeding solicitude, which was slowly but surely breaking down her newly-erected barrier of reserve. Her face held him so, that even whilst he talked to her of himself, he was thinking of her. How best might he please her? How surest say no word that might offend the quick sensitiveness which the delicate mouth betrayed? How longest might he retain, when she had left him, the influence of her dainty nature on his senses? They had reached the ‘Garden House’ by this time, and were standing within the gate.

‘If I were to give such a promise of friendship as you desire,’ she said at length, ‘I would rather give it upon the assurance of my friend that he had a right to ask it, than upon all the

proofs which he or others could give me of his worth.'

'I would not ask it, Miss Crotchet, if I had not such a right.'

'I believe you then, and I will be your friend.'

She spoke almost with the solemnity of a sacrament; and meeting his eyes fearlessly, put her hand into his. He understood her, knowing that she believed herself to be giving him a pledge of such friendship as annihilated all differences of condition and all prejudices of age.

He was not consciously deceiving her. Every word that he had uttered had been dictated by some truthful impulse. Yet, in the face of such truth and earnestness as this, his own became a tarnished thing.

He could not meet her serious eyes. He was half sorry and half frightened at the effect he had produced.

She was so unlike other girls. Flirtation with her was out of the question. From the

first he had felt the necessity of establishing his intercourse with her upon some higher basis, and this was how he had done it.

He had, indeed, promised her only what he could give. He had asked her, nominally at any rate, only for what she might render in return. Yet at once his wider experience went before her candour and simplicity of thought, and presaged for her, and possibly also for himself, certain doubt and difficulty out of this apparently innocent compact. To do him justice, he would gladly have drawn back immediately. Sweet as the assurance of her faith in him was, he wished it undone, even whilst she was speaking. For one moment longer he allowed himself to keep the hand she gave him, then, mastering his emotion, he added lightly—

‘ Well, we cannot improve upon that. When shall we meet next? Shall we ride on Wednesday? Your father, your brother, and I? I hear your horses are come down. I hope

your father was satisfied with any little assistance I was able to render in the matter? A doctor's a safe man to consult about horses, because he has a character to lose.'

'My father and I shall ride. I cannot answer for my brother. He has got the use of the library at the "Squire's House," and he is always there. It's funny how he and Miss Aylmer have struck up an acquaintance.'

'A friendship, perhaps?'

She looked almost pained at this speedy profanation of what was to her a sacred word.

'John's only friends are books,' she answered as she parted from him on the steps of the Garden House.

'The wickedest book that ever was printed would be a safer friend than that man,' grumbled Rebecca from the wrong side of the front door.

'Come in, Miss Augusta. Your aunts aren't at home, and your papa bade me say he had to go to the stables to see the new horses. Mrs. Weasel's been sitting with me. The

Squire's last words are what she has been remarking upon. It would do you good to hear them, Miss Augusta.'

'I had rather hear yours, Rebecca.'

'His will be mine, Miss Crotchet. I never stay where I'm not wanted, except in your aunts' service. That poor gentleman with his dying breath stated that his daughter was "never to marry"—the Doctor. He said that there was that in his "circumstances" which rendered him "unfit."'

'What a proud old person! I daresay Mr. Rudge's circumstances are not past Miss Aylmer's mending.'

'Who named Mr. Rudge, Miss Augusta? I didn't, and the Squire didn't. Dr. Lansdowne's a doctor too, isn't he? and the one that was working the poor father's mind.'

'Dr. Lansdowne! He might as well have left word that his daughter was not to marry my brother! Why, he's a young man, and Miss Aylmer——'

‘Has what will wear out youth and good looks, Miss Crotchet. What’s youth? Any goose can be green. But that is not the question. The moral lies in the “circumstances” which made the Squire call him “unfit.” And if your papa was on his bed of death upstairs, I’ve not a bit of doubt Mrs. Weasel would hear him make the same remark, unless he went off unconscious.’

‘My father’s man is waiting at the kitchen door, Rebecca. I saw him as I came by. He was writing “welcome,” with a stick and a bottle of blacking, very large on your door-step. It is a pity, for it was beautifully whitened; but, I suppose you and Mrs. Weasel were too busy to let him in.’ Rebecca fled in dismay.

Augusta Crotchet had gone down to the shore that afternoon troubled by many things that her Aunt Lilly and this old woman had chosen to insinuate. She had determined to give no occasion for further criticism. And whilst at heart espousing Dr. Lansdowne’s

cause, outwardly to treat it and him with perfect indifference. She came back rejoicing ; because she had found in this very man, as she believed, the best and truest friend. Yet she had not known before that there was any such blank to be filled in her life, nor was she even now sure of its prior existence. What was this influence which he exercised over her ? Resolution, doubt, misgiving, all flying before a few eager glances and a few earnest words. She blushed as she remembered all this now ; but at the time it had seemed only perfectly natural to be talking to him and confiding in him.

Mr. Timlings' persecution had only served to strengthen her championship. Whole, true woman as she was, she was ready almost to be glad that she had shared in the annoyance for Lansdowne's sake. This may have been partly the reason why Mr. Bolton Crotchet never heard from her of that scene upon the cliffs. Had her mother been alive, Augusta fancied

that she could have told her all the story. To that clear-eyed, but weak-minded brunette, whose flattered image lay in her father's desk, Augusta imagined that she should have confided all the perplexities of her wider nature. Well for her that she did not remember how silks and sugarplums had been that glorified mother's chief consolations.

‘ Well, nobody need make disagreeable remarks now. It was all settled. She and Dr. Lansdowne were going to be “ friends.” “ Only friends,” “ always.” ’

‘ Only friends,’ and yet her heart went singing for the richness of the boon which her words discounted thus; and over all the melancholy land the sounds of trouble melted in her ears into songs of joyfulness and mirth.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.





